Shoutarou Mizuki

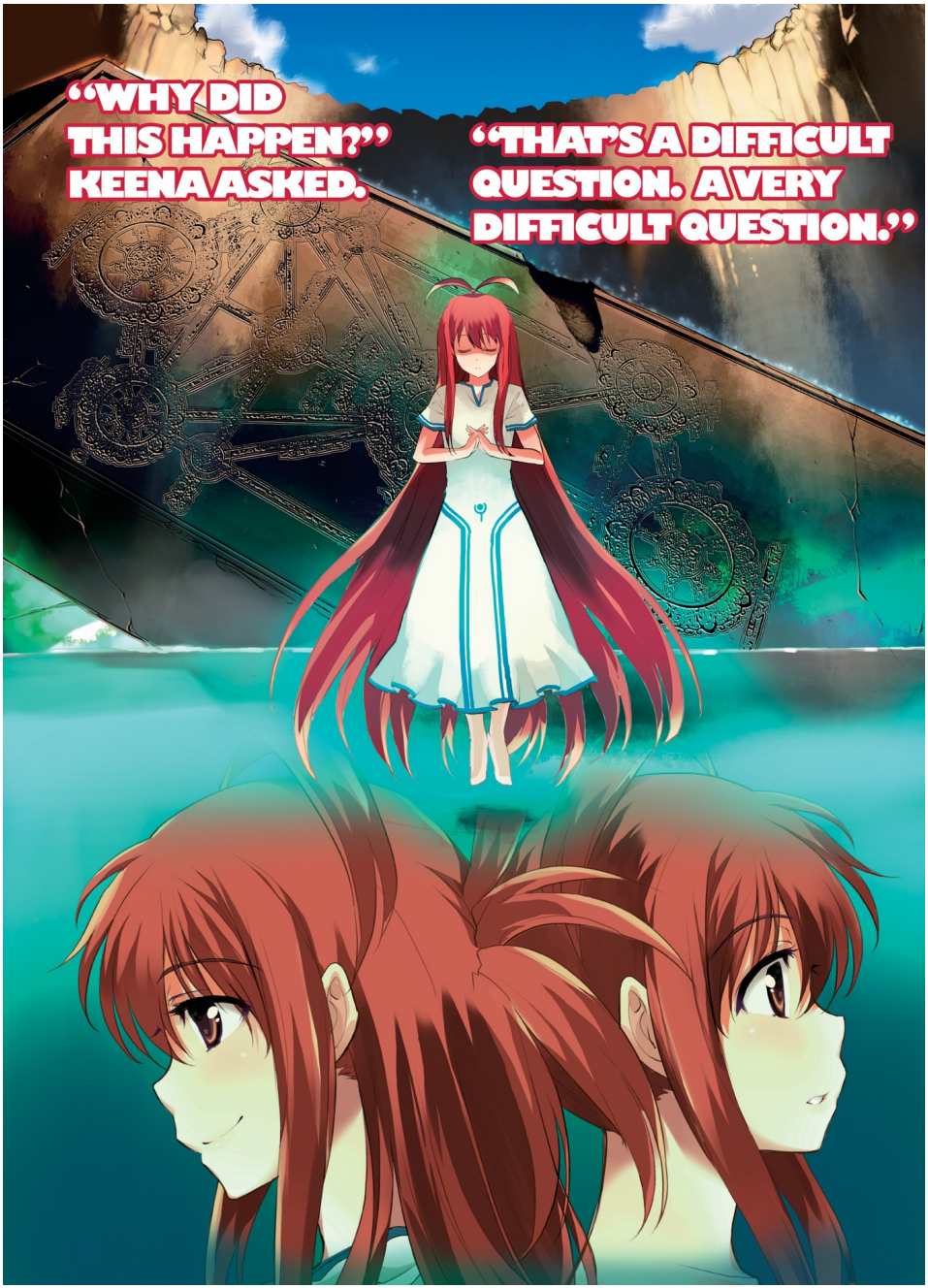


Demon King DAIMAO

ACT 5


Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT5


"HMM... I SUPPOSE THAT'S FINE," AKUTO WHISPERED. AS IF THAT WAS THE SIGN THEY WERE WAITING FOR, COUNTLESS SHRINE PRIESTESSES ATTACKED PETERHAUSEN — ALL AT ONCE.


"WHY DID THIS HAPPEN?" KEENA ASKED.
"THAT'S A DIFFICULT QUESTION. A VERY DIFFICULT QUESTION."


Character Introduction
AKUTO SAI
A "good" hero who was prophesied to become the Demon King in the future. He has vast magical power but is very stubborn and inflexiable.
KEENA SOGA
A ditzy airhead who has taken a liking to Akuto. May hold the key to the story?
BOICHIRO YAMATO
The leader of CMID-8, who for some reason hasn't changed in 100 years. Fights Akuto due to their different stance on the gods.
FUJIKO ETO
A black mage and herbalist who swore loyalty to Akuto. She's older than the others, and is also in charge of the girls dorm.


LILY SHIRAISHI
A pure-hearted class rep who can't stop thinking about Akuto. An Iga Ninja Girl.
JUNKO HATTORI
The student council president of Constant Magical Academy who wears a trademark hat. Decides to deal with Akuto's becoming the Demon King in her own way.
PRINCIPAL
The principal of Constant Magical Academy. A mysterious man who experienced the last Demon King war.
HIROSHI MIWA
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "boss." Also a legendary hero.
PETERHAUSEN
A 15-meter-long black dragon who served the last Demon King. He recognizes Akuto as his master and serves as his steed.
KORONE
A Liradan whose job it is to observe and protect Akuto. Uses secret tools she pulls out of her bag.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

1 - Chaos from the Start

2 - Too Many Masterminds

3 - Akuto and the Flying Carrier

4 - A Perfect Ending?

5 - A Transfer Student From Overseas

Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue

Boichiro Yamato had already lived, from his perspective, several centuries. He'd made an appearance in every era, and he had been disappointed in each of them.

Disappointment had made him strong, but had also made him obstinate. The cause of this was a certain contradiction at the bottom of his heart, one that he couldn't resolve. It was something he'd failed to resolve for years, no, centuries.

In the past — or rather, from the perspective of the present, the future — he had been at a university lab, where he'd studied the science of information synthesis. It was before he became a time traveler. In other words, the first era of his life.

"If a certain race is intellectually inferior, it's right and proper for superior races to lead them, right?" It was Rimu Sudo, Boichiro's instructor, who'd said that.

"Nonsense!"

Boichiro had instantly made his displeasure plain. Racial discrimination was a wicked tradition of the past. For example, the mistake at the core of slavery, a sin which had troubled mankind for ages, was the assumption that the civilized were superior to the uncivilized. It was a hateful idea.

But Rimu shook her head, as if she'd expected that response. There was a slight disappointment in her eyes. Boichiro noticed it and slumped his shoulders.

"Is this some new way of annoying me?"

In the lab, Rimu was his instructor, not his girlfriend. Sometimes she would ask mean questions like that in order to keep that fact fresh in his mind.

"No, that wasn't really what I meant."

Rimu sighed. Not only was she a genius when it came to information synthesis, she was also gorgeous. But she had one obvious flaw: her worship of knowledge and reason left her unable to hide her disgust with those who acted based on emotion.

"I suppose everyone responds that way, even you. But think

about it. If you take the statement at face value, it's absolutely correct," Rimu said, like a teacher speaking to a student.

Boichiro nodded.

"I see. As an academic matter, you're right."

"But once you take that out into the real world, it instantly becomes too much to swallow. Even if there were beings out there that were greater than humanity, which of us would agree to be ruled by them?"

"Why are you bringing this up now?" Boichiro asked, not seeing what she was getting at.

She answered with a more serious look on her face than he'd expected: "Because humanity is going extinct."

"Hmm... this is one of the times when I regret the fact that you don't tell jokes," Boichiro said in an attempt to lighten the mood, but Rimu's expression remained unchanged. That was enough to scare him. "Extinct? Is this some kind of metaphor? Or..."

"Literally," she said.

Boichiro looked around the room. Nobody was listening to them. She must have chosen this moment to talk to him deliberately.

"So this is something you can't talk about publicly." He gulped.

She nodded, pleased that he finally understood.

"Of course. You're the only person who'd hear this and not think I was insane. If we don't start Ragnarok, someone will annihilate humanity."

"What are you talking about...?" Boichiro said, as he tried his best to stay calm. "You're the one who created the fundamental theory for the weapons used to defeat the Demon King. Because of that, even if the Demon King appears, we'll be able to deal with him immediately. So why would humanity go extinct without Ragnarok?"

"The theology that I used for my research was fundamentally incorrect. That's why Demon Kings keep coming back no matter how many times we defeat them."

"Fundamentally incorrect?"

"That's right. The gods have a will of their own now. We failed to see that. We've failed to see that for centuries."

"Then the gods are going to wipe out humanity...? But then, why say 'someone'...?"

"That's right. Perhaps somewhere out there there's real gods,

not a mechanical creation like the system humanity created. The ancient gods, the ones worshiped when humanity first created religion. The gods of the old planet."

Rimu's words put Boichiro in a state of indescribable confusion. What she was saying was that gods were real, and that they were going to destroy humanity.

When she saw that he couldn't speak, Rimu laughed in resignation.

"See? That's the normal reaction, right? But you see, our mechanical gods are using their greater minds to save humanity by killing the vast majority of it. That's what I think."

At this point, Boichiro understood what she was getting at. But if that was right, the implications were terrifying.

"So your first question was...!"

"Yes. Something that's theoretically correct can still invite a negative emotional reaction. It's true that our lives have gotten materially better since we stopped talking about how wars can be righteous, or whites can be cowards. But what if that goes against the reason humanity was created?"

"You mean humanity was born to do acts of discrimination and slaughter?"

"Perhaps so. The gods that made humanity are trying to destroy us, and the mechanical gods that we made are trying to save us."

Boichiro could barely keep up with what she was saying, let alone decide if she was right.

"Y-You've got no proof of this, right?" Boichiro said. It would be far better if she had just gone mad. But Rimu calmly shook her head.

"Like always, when you're dealing with information synthesis, you end up sounding like you're talking about philosophy. But the reason one type of animal feels no compunction in killing another is that they're both part of a greater system, like drops of water in a lake. The only ones who resist that natural order are beings with high intelligence, like us humans. I believe that intelligence consists of resisting becoming part of the natural order. But the gods we created are able to maintain their intelligence while still becoming part of it."

"So then, humanity's destruction..."

"Yes. I heard directly from a god. The priestesses of Suhara told me. Nobody else was able to ask the right questions, so they

couldn't get the answer. And that was enough to keep it concealed for centuries. The reason the Demon King is born. And the reason he's driven to war."

"It sounds unbelievable. That means there's even a possibility we're being deceived. Why do wars need to be started to decrease the population, if saving humanity is the goal? It's impossible..."

Rimu's shoulders slumped in resignation.

"That's where you lack any kind of subtlety. But there's no time, so figure it out yourself. But I do have proof that the gods of the old planet exist. Why is it that the mana teleportation we use can't cross through time? No mana-based technology can. In other words, we can't manipulate the dimensions themselves. So it doesn't make sense that the teleportation works at all. The reason lies with the 'Law of Identity:' The fact that you can't escape the thought that you are yourself, and that the cores of our minds are living creatures. It was the gods of the old planet who created this law."

She shook her head, as if once again disappointed in Boichiro's failure to understand.

"You don't need to believe me. If you don't, I can give you a chance to research it for yourself. If you succeed, maybe you'll understand me."

She made her mana gauge appear and showed it to him.

"This is the resonant frequency of my mana. It can be used to travel through time."

"Th-That's..."

Impossible, he almost said, but changed his mind. He was starting to think that maybe she really had gone insane. Just like she'd said, time travel had been a research subject for years, and everyone who'd tried had failed.

"You'll understand if you do it. I can do it because I am the Law of Identity," she said, and smiled softly.

There was nothing for Boichiro to say. "I'll try" was all he could think of.

"Don't go public with what you've heard here. The time travel technology needs to be a secret until it's complete, too. I'll come and check on you every once in a while."

And then she left him alone in the lab. But before she did, she turned around to say one last thing: "If I go public with this, what will happen to me?"

She was still smiling, but she somehow seemed sad.

Boichiro understood what her expression meant. She would be made out to be a madwoman. Nobody would believe her, and if she ever acted to make her ideals real, she would surely be arrested.

It seemed to Boichiro that her smile came from despair. And he couldn't help but think that the despair was his fault. Rimu would've wanted someone who could think the same things she did, and until she'd explained, he'd been unable to do so. Just as many had doubtless been unable to do so before him.

"W-Wait..." Boichiro tried to stop her, but she left without answering.

Boichiro never saw her again. She'd said she'd come to check up on him, but soon afterward, she'd started to help the Demon King.

Boichiro's despair was beyond healing. He dedicated himself to his research, the last connection he had with her, and as a result he gained the ability to control spacetime. But when he learned that he could never return to a time when he'd existed, he realized that he'd lost any chance of seeing Rimu ever again.

And not only that, the instant he'd developed this technology had been the instant mankind had been destroyed.

Every time he closed his eyes, he still saw it.

A dark red sky with a strange whirlwind. In the center of the whirlwind was an indescribable huge and ominous being. Surrounding it in a spiral were tens of thousands of the Demon King's soldiers, and at its head was the transformed Demon King. Next to him was Rimu.

Despite the apocalyptic scene unfolding before him, what he felt more than anything was that he had betrayed his lover's trust, and been betrayed in turn. If he could have, he would've killed himself. But he knew that he would be the last human left. The results of his research had shown him that the gods of the old planet would destroy humanity for sure.

Boichiro had to flee. Now that he was humanity's only time traveler, he was the only one who could change things.

He set off through time, alone, and this was the beginning of his long, long despair.

1 - Chaos from the Start

Three thousand and seven hundred soldiers surrounded the Demon Castle that was previously Constant Magical Academy. The aerial carrier “Genkaku” was there as well. No matter how many demon beasts were forming the walls of the castle, the situation would rapidly be under control. Or it would be, if it weren’t for the Demon King, Akuto Sai.

The school building and its yard could be seen from the camp where Eiko Teruya had taken command. Junko Hattori’s 600 Iga ninjas were in the yard, and a 1200-strong regiment of imperial infantry were there as well, making a total of 1800 soldiers. The plan was for them to cut a path through the demon beasts surrounding the school, and open a way for the rest of the force to get in.

But Eiko’s plan had already fallen apart. A screw-like stake had burst out of the ground, and Akuto and the black dragon Peterhausen had appeared. Now the troops were on the verge of a riot.

“Mistress, your orders!” the leader of the regiment said to Eiko over the comm system.

“Don’t call me ‘mistress!’ I’m the head of the family now! Orders? The only possible order would be to take down the Demon King!” she shouted back.

But in that minute, she felt someone behind her and turned around. She’d been standing alone in her tent, but now there was a man in a suit with her.

Eiko sighed. It was the agent from the Cabinet’s Magical Information Department that had been lurking around since before this mission, codenamed “Operation Castlebreaker,” had started. He was one of C-MID8, the personal staff of the Information Department’s leader, Boichiro Yamato.

The man spoke into the comms system, though of course he hadn’t been given permission.

“The Demon King isn’t as frightening as he appears. He won’t

attack anyone who flees, and he has the naive idea that it's better not to kill if you can avoid it. Keep your distance and try to provoke him."

"...What?!"

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She ended the call and turned around, glaring at him with the imposing manner unique to the Teruya clan, but he seemed completely unperturbed.

He looked to be in his 30s. There was nothing particularly unique about him, besides his casual manner. It was possible to believe that he was just a normal businessman. There was no hiding his well-built frame, but it was impossible to guess how much muscle might be under that suit. She'd heard that all of C-MID8 were experts in magical combat, but it didn't seem that way to her.

"You said you were going to just act on your own!" Eiko yelled. The man just smiled.

"My apologies. I just gathered some information, and I believe we can cooperate. One of the things I learned of was the Demon King's personality. So, I simply suggested that you take advantage of that."

Eiko didn't know what to say. She took a glance over at the flow of battle. The Demon King and his dragon seemed to be dealing poorly with the infantry's passivity. They'd blown away several of the troops on the surface, but now they seemed to be simply flying in circles.

"...I'll keep that in mind. What's your name?"

The man answered by making V signs with both hands. He looked so ridiculous that Eiko couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"Are you making fun of me...?"

"2V. That's my codename. Nice to meet you, pretty lady."

2V ignored her obvious anger and began to move the different pieces on the map that signified the battle units.

"Your goal was to destroy the demon beasts and capture or kill their king, right? But the situation has changed."

"I-I was planning on having the infantry delay him until the carrier could attack," Eiko said, but 2V ignored her.

"A carrier attack would cause severe damage to the school. This whole battle is being broadcasted nationally, and we can't damage the school's reputation. It would be better for the infantry to take out the Demon King on their own. Am I wrong?"

"I-I know that!"

“No, I’m sorry, but this deployment shows several bad habits of new commanders. You forgot that magical battles take place in three dimensional space, right? The dragon is flying. The soldiers provoking him are on foot. The only ones you have who can fight him are your air units on standby in that carrier. You were planning on sending them into the school at a critical moment, right? But that’s not how you fight magical battles. You use your air forces against theirs.”

All Eiko could do was listen. 2V waved a hand to motion for her to calm down.

“Don’t worry. You’ll remain in command. I’m just offering you information. My information says that there’s a device in the school that’s controlling the demon beasts. If you change your goal to getting at that, you’ll find it easier to win. As soon as it’s down, the demon beasts will lose control when the Demon King is farther away,” 2V said confidently.

Eiko wasn’t sure what to think. Army intelligence hadn’t said anything about a demon beast control device. But 2V seemed to sense what she was thinking, and cut her off.

“This is information we found on our own. Finding information is our job, after all. I’m sorry to say this, but we’re superior to your own intelligence officers.”

“Can I trust you?” Eiko asked, and he grinned.

“Of course.”

“You say there’s a device that controls the demon beasts?”

“That’s right. Now, why don’t we change the goal of the operation to be destroying that?”

2V reached out a hand towards the map, but Eiko grabbed it.

“I’m the one in command, here. You just give me the information. And what’s more, you’re planning on going off on your own, right? So do it.”

“Of course.” He pulled away, pretending to be far more intimidated than he obviously was.

○

“A control device?” Student Council President Lily Shiraishi, in her trademark hat, asked. In front of her were Keena Soga and Fujiko Eto, mounted on a giant three-headed Cerberus.

“That’s right,” Fujiko replied. “I call it the ‘altar.’”

Fujiko's long hair waved as she moved her head. She was wearing an extremely skimpy leather outfit instead of her usual uniform. It was her own idea, evidently, of what a servant of the Demon King should look like. The "evil queen" look suited her beautiful body well.

"That outfit is against the school rules. And now you're making a device to control demon beasts and putting it here? Are you trying to pick a fight?"

There was a big difference between violating the school rules on uniforms and illegally controlling demon beasts, but since the tiny Lily lacked Fujiko's figure, they seemed to be equal in her eyes. Lily looked about ready for a fight, but Fujiko only laughed in response.

"Hahaha! Of course not! The altar is for Akuto. It's not the school, but Akuto, who is righteous and strong. It wouldn't even be a fight."

There was murder in Lily's eyes.

"If you don't cut it out, I'll take down both you and him," she said.



“Don’t fight, guys. The principal’s doing his best for us, right?” Keena tried to calm them both down.

“I didn’t expect to hear that from you,” Fujiko said, but it was enough to get her to relax. Lily seemed to feel the same way.

“...Let’s worry about the details later. Just where is this altar, anyway?”

Fujiko answered Lily’s question by pointing straight ahead.

They were at the bottom of the space below the Academy, where the Demon King’s palace was. They were heading to the lowest point, where the demon beasts were sealed away.

“The demon beasts are controlled by Akuto’s unique mana waves, but when Akuto moves away or his mind isn’t stable, they go out of control. So I created a device that sends out stable mana waves.”

The door at the end of the corridor opened and a small room appeared. Fujiko got down from her Cerberus and pointed to the center of the room. There was a black magic altar there, decorated with dragons and skulls. It was just big enough for a single person to stand in front of it and perform rituals. It was colored a poisonous-looking red and black.

“You’ve got some taste in decorating,” Lily said with a frown, but Fujiko ignored her.

“Thank you. The device itself was simple, so I focused on how it looked.”

“Simple, huh? I can see that the waves are coming from that pot-shaped thing in the center, but... Wait, I thought it was impossible to replicate a person’s unique mana frequency,” Lily said. Fujiko suddenly got stars in her eyes.

“It was difficult, taking a part of Akuto’s body and growing it until it could generate mana waves.”

“Huh? There wasn’t that much time between you deciding to make this thing and now, was there?” Lily asked, but Fujiko just put her hand up to her cheek in embarrassment, and didn’t answer.

“A-Anyway, if you can’t protect this, we lose.” Lily coughed as she spoke.

“That’s right. We need to defend this to the death.” Fujiko spread out her hands to display a mana screen showing a map of the school.

“Just defend it to the death? That won’t help anything,” Lily said. Fujiko put her hand on her hip and smiled.

“Akuto said he would kill the gods. It’s my duty to obey him. And we won’t just be defending. Fortunately, the whole country is watching this. If they all see the demon beasts destroying the army, it will give courage to black mages all over the country!”

“You’re sure taking this easy. Well, if that’s your plan, we’re enemies.”

“Enemies? Isn’t your job to protect the school?”

“Are you an idiot? I’m not fighting on the side of the Demon King. I just followed you to see what you’re up to,” Lily said angrily.

“Don’t worry. I won’t get in your way. And we both have the same enemy right now, right?”

“Eiko Teruya? I know what she did. The security cameras came online just in time. I have the proof, but she’s planning on getting rid of it, and me.”

“And I’m thinking about how to fight back, you see. If you’re planning on going out there and fighting that whole army yourself, though, go ahead.”

“You have a plan?” Lily asked.

“Of course I do. The demon beasts are obeying my orders, they’ll all work in perfect unison. And I know exactly what a sneaky cheat like Eiko Teruya is going to do.”

“Is that because you’re a sneaky cheat, too?” Lily meant it as an insult, but Fujiko nodded back with a bright smile.

“‘Sneaky cheat’ is the perfect complement for a black mage! Eiko Teruya is going to deploy her forces gradually for fear that we’ll self-destruct.”

Lily sighed. But since Fujiko had mentioned her plan, she decided to ask more about it.

“Self-destruct?”

“There’s only a few students in here with the demon beasts. If they all swarm the school, we could blow it up and take out her whole army. That’s what she’ll be afraid of.”

“I see.”

“So she’ll deploy gradually. And that means she’ll be vulnerable.”

Fujiko looked like she was about to start cackling, but Lily interrupted her before she could.

“But that’s only if Eiko Teruya is in command, right?”

“Yes, of course. Does she look like the type who’d turn control over to someone else?”

“I was looking into C-MID8, and I found a guy with the codename 2V.”

“2V?” Fujiko asked, confused by the tone of Lily’s voice.

“A magical specialist who uses autonomous dolls. He’s supposed to be a master of tactics.”

“And how is that relevant?”

“If you’re that confident, then never mind. But I can’t imagine he’ll be thinking the same thing as Eiko Teruya. If he has some other goal, things won’t go the way you expect.” Lily’s tone was strong, but Fujiko didn’t seem that concerned.

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Is that all? Fine, have fun then.” Lily went to leave the altar room.

Keena saw that she was leaving, and spoke up.

“You’re leaving?”

“The principal bought us time. I’m going to make good use of it,” Lily said without turning back.

○

The principal had already gone several rounds with Boichiro. Boichiro was carrying the huge sword that had blasted even Akuto away. He hadn’t attacked with it again, because the principal hadn’t shown any openings.

The principal had taken his shirt off, and his muscles were heaving. He was constantly and silently swinging his arms in front of him.

Anyone who knew him normally wouldn’t believe what they were seeing now. An old man who’d looked like a twig was now covered in an incredible amount of muscle, and stripped to the waist. It was the ultimate form of self-transformation magic.

“Why are you standing in my way?” Boichiro asked in a stern voice.

The path to the basement was a single corridor, and the only way through was past the principal.

“Because this isn’t like it was 100 years ago,” the principal said in a strangely youthful-sounding voice.

“Once, I fought by your side,” Boichiro said, “in the battle to

defeat the Demon King."

"The last Demon King, you mean."

"Then why? Why do you block my path when you know what I'm trying to do?"

"I haven't forgotten what you're after. But as I've gotten older, I've changed my mind. Back then, I thought it was right to defeat the Demon King."

"And it's not right now? Even though nothing's changed?"

"It's true that nothing's changed. But that's not because we failed. The last Demon King was defeated, and you're here now, anyway. In other words, the future didn't change, right?"

Boichiro grimaced, like he'd touched a sore spot.

"But back then I didn't know what the Law of Identity was!" Boichiro yelled.

In the next instant, he was gone. He had advanced forward at an incredible speed. Instantly he was in front of the principal, where he stopped. But the momentum drove the sword in his hands towards the principal. The blade went past the speed of sound, and a sonic boom tore through the corridor.

The principal wasn't able to dodge. If he did, Boichiro would be able to pass him. But if he took the hit, he would be blown back. The same attack had even taken down Akuto.

But the principal just exhaled sharply for a moment, and then began to spin his arms in front of himself even faster.

Suddenly they began to cling to the sides of the blade as they moved. Then, the rotation of his arms knocked the huge blade away.

"Gah!"

Boichiro couldn't stop the blade before it slammed into a wall. It stopped, after taking out a chunk of the wall, but Boichiro was forced to retreat before the principal could follow up with an attack of his own on his now-defenseless body.

The two of them were soon back to their original positions.

The walls surrounding them were missing several large pieces. The reason the two of them were still fighting was that the same thing had repeated itself several times.

The headmaster never followed up with any attacks, and so time just kept passing.

"Are you just trying to buy time?"

"Imagine what you like. This style of deflecting your attacks

suits my old body, that's all."

"Either way, the two of us are stuck here," Boichiro said.

"And things are just getting worse for me. I didn't want to kill you, since you are a former comrade. I wanted to talk to you. But at this point, I have no choice. Don't hate me if I have to take your life."

Boichiro readied his blade.

"I'll slice the dimensions apart, and you with them. Hodgson Type Complete Severing!" Boichiro shouted as he swung his sword, and the space around the blade began to separate like jelly.

The rift passed towards the principal at an impossible speed. This attack tore through the air itself, and anything else with it. It had been enough to cut off Akuto's arm, and the principal's rotating arms wouldn't be enough to block it.

The severed space touched the principal's body, but nothing happened at all. It went clean through it, and the principal was unharmed.

"What...?" Boichiro raised an eyebrow.

He fired another Hodgson Type Complete Severing. But once again, it passed through the principal's body.

"How did you do it? Is that a hologram?"

He fired another one, and then charged. He brought his sword down just behind the severed space.

The principal didn't dodge, and the blade was knocked away by the rotation of his arms.

"What's going on?" Boichiro fell back once more.

"It's a secret how I do it. But you need tricks like this if you want to live a long life. Oh, I guess you've lived a long time too... Now, since we're old friends, why don't we have a chat? At my age, there aren't many people I can talk to about the past." The principal smiled.

"I thought it was a hologram, but I guess I was wrong. You're a sly old man. But I'm not so young as to get mad when someone tricks me. If you've got something to say, then say it. But don't let your guard down..."

Boichiro charged again, but not as fast. He kept his attacks short and sharp, jabbing several times in a row. Now, he could maintain his balance if his blade was knocked away.

"The last Demon King was defeated, yes. But that didn't fix things. So now I can't believe what you say." The principal rotated

his arms quickly, knocking away all the strikes.

"I'm not lying about humanity being destroyed!"

"That, I believe. I simply suspect that your method of saving us is wrong."

"That's why humanity has to control the gods! Humanity has to make its own choices. We abandoned that, and that's why we were destroyed!" Boichiro yelled, but the principal shook his head.

"No. That's not what you're after. You're obsessed with the girl you spoke of."

Boichiro stopped.

The two of them glared at each other from up close.

"A century ago, I opened my heart up to you and told you the truth. I never thought I'd regret it," Boichiro sighed softly.

"My heart is still open to you," the principal said softly. "But I realized something when we defeated the last Demon King. You just want to take his place."

Boichiro choked on his words.

"The Law of Identity, was it? The girl you call that seems somewhat similar. Did you see something of her in Keena Soga?" the principal asked, and Boichiro suddenly raised his sword.

"Are you accusing me of being that small?"

The sword began to rumble loudly. The principal blocked it again as he answered.

"No. Your good heart is a rarity among mankind. And the greatness of your resolve means you walk a lonely path. And that's why I say this."

"I'm going to control the gods, and in doing so avoid the destruction of mankind. What's wrong with that? What's the point of destroying the gods? It's not right! It's just giving in to the impulse to destroy!"

"There's no point in debating it with me. But it feels to me like you're wrong."

"So you're saying the Demon King is right?"

"No, he's wrong too."

"So whose side are you on? I hate old men who complain from the sidelines and don't have to make a choice!"

"I was young a century ago." The principal took a step back as he blocked the attacks. He was out of breath.

"So you're not young anymore, huh?" Boichiro, however, wasn't out of breath at all.

“I’m not in that big of a hurry. We can talk a little more, I think.”

Boichiro readied his sword and began to slowly advance again.

○

“I’m not changing the plan. Our fliers can deal with their flyer. It’s as simple as that,” Eiko growled at 2V before shouting her orders at her confused commanders via the comms.

“Platoons 1 and 2, advance toward the front entrance. 3 to the side entrance, 4 to the connecting corridor. Keep your distance from the Demon Beasts and prepare for the assault.”

She’d divided up her troops and ordered them all to stand by.

“That makes it easier for your opponents to defend. Why divide your forces?” 2V protested. Eiko glared at him.

“Because they might blow up the whole building. And the enemy’s entirely dependent on the Demon King. It’s much more important to delay him, right?”

“If you have a way to delay him, that is.”

“Hmph. Of course I do. All that ‘three-dimensional warfare’ stuff you talked about basically means that we just need somebody who can fly, right?” Eiko picked up her communicator again.

“All Hattori units, give your full attention to the Demon King,” she said, and waited for an answer. The leader of the Hattori was Junko right now. She didn’t hear Junko’s voice responding.

“Well, Junko? What’s your answer?” she asked with a cruel smile.

“Roger!”

She heard Junko yell back at her. She grimaced for a moment before shutting off the comms and laughing.

“Hahaha! This’ll do, right? They have lots of people who can fly, and if things turn bad, they’ve got that ‘Brave’ guy, too! Now let’s see what you’ve got to show us, Junko!”

Eiko turned to watch the fight, but 2V frowned when her back was turned.

“She’s even worse of a commander than I expected... I knew this wasn’t good, but I don’t want things turning too far from our favor,” he whispered to himself, before making a quick motion with his right hand as if beckoning to one of his men.

One of the messengers came into the tent.

None of the people around him noticed, but this was strange; the members of C-MID8 didn't have the authority to command soldiers.

But the reason quickly revealed itself. The messenger who leaned in towards 2V had the blank expression unique to Liradans.

"I guess I'd better take command," he said softly, exchanging glances with the Liradan messenger. His eyes glowed with the special light given off by mana. When the Liradan nodded back, this time there was sentience in its eyes.

This was 2V's favorite spell. He could possess a Liradan and control it like it was his own body. And the Liradans, who were responsible for running errands for the military, had been modified to receive his mind.

"Now, what's your next move?" he asked Eiko.

Eiko began to share her plans, such as they were, but 2V was barely listening. He'd sent the Liradan messenger running to mix in with the soldiers.

"I wonder if Boichiro is up for the job," the messenger said to itself, in 2V's voice.

2 - Too Many Masterminds

—Do I really have to fight?

Junko had thought she was resolved, but now she was feeling uncertain.

This was a battlefield, yes, but right now the only enemy was Akuto in the skies above. And Akuto was mostly just trying to keep the soldiers away from the school building. After 2V's words, most of the soldiers who didn't want to fight were trying to stay as still as possible. The demon beasts around the school weren't moving either, so the situation didn't feel as tense as a battle should have. That is, until Eiko's order came.

—You can't back down now!

Junko ordered herself, but she couldn't help but think.

—I have to obey orders, but it's Eiko who's giving them. It would be stupid of me to simply follow her orders to the letter. But it's also for the sake of my family. No, but Grandmother told me to do what I think is best. But... what do I think is best? What do I want to do?

Junko wasn't sure, but the soldiers around her were furious at Akuto. The minute Eiko had given her order, the Hattori ninjas had been the first to fly up into the sky.

"We'll avenge you, mistress!" they all screamed.

They were master soldiers, skilled in all types of combat magic. Five them surrounded Akuto as he circled in the sky on Peterhausen, all of them moving like one organic creature as they attacked.

"Iga Ninja Technique: Five Pointed Magic Circle!"

They rapidly moved in a circle, each of them following up the other's attacks. They used swords, shurikens, scythes... It was a powerful combination attack that had probably been developed to defeat huge magical beasts.

"It's been a long time since I've fought, and it seems human fighting styles have evolved!" Peterhausen shouted with joy. The old dragon, the Demon Lord's servant, seemed excited for his first battle in a long time.

But his master, Akuto, didn't seem to be enjoying the battle.

"It's an unnecessary evolution, and it's not that effective, either."

Akuto stood up on Peterhausen's back and grabbed the leg of an attacking ninja. He spun the ninja around and used them to deflect the others' attacks.

"They seem to have prepared for a situation where one of them is taken hostage, but they aren't able to deal with unexpected situations well," Akuto said. He flung the ninja he was holding at the others, sending them all to the ground below.

For an instant, blood ran to Junko's head when she saw how casually her men had been defeated.

"You bastard! What are you doing?"

Junko leapt into the air. She put her hand on the larger of the two katanas at her waist. But then she remembered that it was her clan's treasure sword, the Sohaya no Tsurugi. If you weren't chosen by the sword — if you weren't chosen by the god Suhara — you couldn't draw it.

—Can I draw it? No, if I can't...

"Tch!"

Junko grabbed the smaller sword instead. She drew it and held it with a backhand grip as she slashed at Akuto.

Akuto blocked her simple attack with his bare hand. He'd grabbed onto the blade itself.

"Guh!" Junko grimaced. She couldn't move the sword, no matter how hard she pulled or pushed on it. And there was no blood coming from Akuto's hand, either.

Akuto was staring at her wordlessly. The lack of evil in his eyes made her flinch.

"Wh...Why are you making that face?"

Junko used the katana as support as she spun her leg around to kick at his face. He dodged the blow by slightly moving his head, and at the same time let go of the sword. The momentum of her own attack carried her away from him.

"Tch... Wh-Why?!"

She didn't cry, but she bit down on her lip. It was frustrating that he didn't even think of her as an opponent. She hated her own weakness.

—It's like he doesn't even care about me! And he doesn't seem upset at all, even though I'm his enemy! Am I too weak for him to think of me

as a threat? Or do I just not matter to him at all? Gah...! Why am I even thinking about this?

She put the smaller katana away. And then, she put her hand on the Sohaya no Tsurugi.

—If I had the power to at least wound him once...! Then he would give me his attention!

"Why don't you care about me?!" she yelled.



And then she realized that she'd shared her deepest thoughts without realizing it.

—No... That's not what I meant! I mean, it is, but... No!

Junko charged forward, her hand still on the Sohaya no Tsurugi, but she couldn't draw it.

Her face took on a look of shock as she realized she didn't have a weapon, but once she'd started moving, she couldn't stop. She approached Akuto fast, her hand still on the hilt. And ridiculously enough, she slammed right into him.

"Aah!"

She realized that Akuto had wrapped his arms around her, and squirmed. But Akuto didn't let her go.

"S-Stop it! What are you doing?"

"I didn't realize you felt that way." Akuto said. Junko froze.

"Huh?"

"You're so much more important than me. Even now, you have so many people serving you. So I had no idea you wanted me to care about you," he whispered into her ear, his voice completely serious.

"A-Are you stupid? Don't you realize what's happening now?" she said, but he just nodded and continued.

"My battle is something that only I can fight, so I became obsessed with it. Once it's over, I promise to treasure you."

"T-Treasure me?" Junko felt her face getting so red she thought it might explode, as all the tension drained from her body.

"Be careful," Akuto said as he gently set her down. Her flight magic was still in effect, so her body slowly floated towards the ground.

—Y-You dummy... If you say that, then I won't know what to do...

○

Junko was still in control as she fell towards the ground, but the Iga Ninjas were too far away to realize this.

"Th-The mistress was defeated!"

"Curse you, Demon King! Did you use magic on her at a range too close to dodge?"

"Let's go! Attack again!"

“Eight-Pointed Magic Circle of Rage!”

This time, eight of them attacked Akuto at once.

Peterhausen sighed when he saw them.

“I guess I take back what I said. They’ve evolved, but only enough to learn one attack...”

The dragon knocked the Iga Ninjas away with a wave.

“They’re just angry. You shouldn’t be insulting. Though what they’re angry about, I don’t know...” Akuto said.

“...More importantly, my master, what do we do now? If there’s no one here who can threaten you, there’s no need to be up in the sky. We should go achieve our goal.”

“There’s someone we need to stay up here for. We can’t leave just yet.”

Akuto was looking down at Yuko. Junko’s little sister, the popular idol. After her near-fatal encounter with demon beasts, she now had demon beast mana in her body. And Akuto’s appearance appeared to have affected her mind. She had almost lost control when she saw Junko fall, and now she was rising up towards Akuto.

“That girl? You can ignore her. If you want to save lives...”

Akuto cut him off and pointed behind her.

“I’m talking about that.”

“Behind her?” Peterhausen spun his head around again to see a shadow rising like a bullet behind her.

“Him?!” Peterhausen cried. “Uwooaah!”

Brave was slicing through the atmosphere as he rose up towards them. Brave, wearing his trademark special suit, was known as the hero who appeared out of nowhere to defeat demon beasts. The light surrounding him wasn’t the same usually emitted by mana use — it appeared that his suit didn’t use any kind of mana.

“I don’t sense any mana!” Peterhausen shouted in surprise.

“Be careful, he can probably use a mana canceler.”

Just as Akuto finished his words, he and Peterhausen collided with Brave.

There was a sound of clashing metal that could be heard even by the soldiers below. Then the two of them backed off from one another and faced off.

Brave was holding the high-frequency blade claw with a look of confidence, but Peterhausen’s body was shaking with excitement.

“Oh, this is a surprise! In my century of life, no one has ever hurt me before!” The dragon shook his wings to level himself out,

as if trying to maintain his sanity.

"Hurt you? Are you okay?" Akuto asked, but Peterhausen just smiled cruelly.

"Okay? If anything, I don't know what to do with all this power. This is why I was born! The claw on his hand is as hard as my own claws! He is a worthy foe! Foes like him are the only ones that can make me realize why I exist! You understand? You should understand, right master?"

"I do. Those who were born strong always end up alone. Especially those like you, who don't grow weaker with time. But this time, we may need to be prepared to lose. This is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to his claws' power, and he has other weapons as well," Akuto said.

In the video he'd seen before, Brave had caused the claw to vibrate at a high frequency. And he hadn't yet used the wires that had ripped the demon beasts around him apart instantly, either.

"Prepared to lose? Heh. I'm prepared to die, but I'll never be prepared to lose." Peterhausen laughed.

"Glad to hear it," Akuto said, though he sounded a little sad.

Brave was hovering in front of Yuko, who'd caught up to him from below, as if to protect her. He was whispering something in her ear. She must've agreed with whatever he said, because she headed back down.

"It seems he has a soft spot for women, as well."

"As well?" Akuto ignored Peterhausen's comments as he pointed to Brave. "Anyway, we won't be able to leave unless we can deal with him somehow."

"Ahh yes, so it seems. He's a worthy opponent for us. Now, let's go." Peterhausen accelerated towards Brave.

○

Yuko went back down to the ground.

"Mistress, that was crazy!"

"Let us handle this!"

The ninjas worriedly gathered around her, but she shook her head. She didn't try to tell them she was okay. Instead, she pointed upwards with a brilliant smile.

"Don't worry. Brave will kill him for us. Let's kill the other demon beasts," Yuko said with an idol's grin.

There were live broadcasting cameras on the battlefield. And there was a cameraman who covered Yuko, the idol, specifically. Her idol face was probably for that reason, but there was a madness in her that made it plain there was something more going on.

"Everyone! Forget the orders! Brave will handle them! So let's get inside the school!" Yuko waved her hand for everyone to follow her, and then started to run.

The ninjas around her weren't sure what to do. They'd just been told to disobey orders, and their commander wasn't Yuko, it was Junko.

Junko had backed away from the fight, and was telling the ninjas that she was okay. When she heard what Yuko was doing, she approached her to scold her.

"Yuko, this is a battlefield, you can't just..."

But her lecture was quickly cut off. A cameraman and a reporter had gotten between them.

"After being protected by the heroic Brave, Yuri Hoshino is about to head into battle! Yuri! Yuri!" The reporter knocked Junko out of the way, calling her stage name. "Yuri! Don't you think it's dangerous?"

"I'll be fine! Brave is going to defeat the evil Demon King! So it's my job to beat up the demon beasts!" Yuko said to the cameras.

It was like a scene from a movie, where a courageous idol overcomes her fear and heads into battle. She was clearly acting, but the battlefield was for real. It must have been tremendously exciting for the viewers.

There was no denying that this was the real thing.

Junko got a message from Eiko, her commander.

"Yuko can take command of the Hattori ninjas." "Does that mean you're changing your orders?" Junko asked.

"Yup. Her little stunt's getting a good reaction. You're pretty popular yourself, too. Maybe you could be an idol if you wanted to," Eiko said sarcastically.

Eiko had allowed the broadcast only because she wanted the people on her side. She seemed to be receiving reports about viewer reaction, too.

"...Roger." Junko said, frustrated. She followed after Yuko, motioning for the others to go as well.

The Hattori ninjas charged towards the school with Yuko in the lead. The units on standby near the building had already begun

their assault.

○

“Heheheh... It’s always a pleasure to see an enemy fall into your trap.” Fujiko grinned as she watched the battle unfold on her mana screen.

“You sound kind of like a bad guy...” Keena said as she watched Fujiko.

“I am the bad guy,” Fujiko said matter-of-factly.

The Student Council President had already left, and except for the Cerberus, only Fujiko and Keena were in the small, screen-filled room.

Fujiko was looking from one screen to another, giving orders to her demon beasts. The screens were displaying the school’s security cameras, showing all the important spots for Fujiko’s strategy. In other words, the spots where the enemy was trying to break in.

“Just as I planned. The standard strategy in this situation is to lay siege to the enemy, but she can’t do that with the cameras rolling. She’s too scared of casualties to have everyone charge the school at once. In the end, her only choice is to attack the three entrances, the front entrance, the rear, and the connecting corridor, at the same time. It’s like she’s walking right into my trap! Hahaha!” Fujiko laughed as she waited for the right moment.

The right moment would be when the enemy just entered the school. The enemy had built barricades near the school, and had split into two groups: some firing assault rifles at the school, while others readied their katanas. The question was, when the enemy was going to move?

Fujiko had the demon beasts with hard shells, like crabs and turtles, stationed at the outer walls of the school. The Incantation bullets from a rifle wouldn’t be able to hurt them, but she had still ordered them to slowly retreat. She was luring the enemy in.

And then at Eiko’s order, the charge came. It was right after the Hattori had been given permission to attack, and just what Fujiko had hoped for.

The platoon commanders gave the assault order. The rifle fire intensified, as Incantation bullets loaded with explosive magic rained down on the entrances. In the next instant, the soldiers came in through the smoke, covering each other’s flanks.

But Fujiko's orders came just an instant quicker.

"Begin the attack on the barricades! Aim from above!"

The demon beasts began to charge, all at once. The demon beasts that used echo-location to see were able to attack the enemy without being interrupted by the smoke, and the flying types were able to go over the smoke and explosions to swarm the barricades.

Each platoon had a few fliers, which were all carrying large steel greatshields to use as mobile barricades to defend from air attacks. But there were just too many demon beasts. Until then, demon beasts had never used any kind of tactics. Furthermore, very few members of the military had ever actually fought them, so they were quickly pushed back on the defensive.

The same thing happened to the soldiers who were trying to get inside. They hadn't expected the demon beasts to attack, and the flying ones were now behind them, so they couldn't return to the barricades.

"Split up and fight!" one of the platoon commanders shouted hopelessly.

The individual soldiers knew little magic, and had no way of winning in a one-on-one fight against a demon beast, so "fighting" was out of the question. They were quickly knocked back by the demon beasts and removed from the fight.

The few who could use magic protected their comrades, and tried to maintain order by falling back from the barricades, but the whole assault force was in chaos.

Fujiko saw the same thing happening on all three screens, and laughed loudly.

"Ahahaha! A great victory! I guess that's just proof that I'm the better commander!"

But Keena sounded worried.

"Are all those soldiers okay, you think?"

"In the military, if you're hurt, you drop back and leave the fight. Things are different than they were hundreds of years ago. They have medics, and not even a few percent will die instantly. And anyway, if we worry about that, we can't win!" Fujiko answered excitedly, but she didn't order her demon beasts to pursue. She was satisfied with routing the four platoons, so she drew her forces back. "Next, it's time for the Hattori to arrive. These guys are tough. Even alone, they can fight demon beasts. I'll have to change my strategy..."

Fujiko turned her attention to the Hattori Ninjas charging the front gates. She could see Junko and Yuko walking at their head.

"Oh, it's Junko!" Keena exclaimed worriedly. But Fujiko grinned.

"That's perfect. This is my chance to bury my rival!"

"Huh? You can't do that," Keena said, but Fujiko ignored her.

"Hohoho. Even if she gets hurt, it's her fault. Even if Akuto forgives her for opposing him, I won't!"

"Hey, you can't do that! Right, Kelpie?" Keena said as she rubbed the throats of all three of the Cerberus's heads.

"Would you not give my monsters weird names? Kelpie's the name of an entirely different type of demon beast! And I thought you hated dogs!"

"Dogs are scary. But if he's got three heads, he's not a dog, right?"

"I don't really understand how that works..."

"It doesn't matter! If you fight too much, you'll go 'bon!'"

"'Bon'? What are you talking about?" Fujiko asked, confused.

But there wasn't time to worry about it. Fujiko had to deal with the ninjas.

"They're here! Now let's go, my demon beasts!"

○

Eiko had given the okay for the Hattori to attack, but she'd been astonished at what had happened in the battle just after that.

"N-No... Damn it! Don't run just because the enemy showed up! I need units who can fight the demon beasts... I know. Hattori's troops just went up there. I'll have them do it and pull the others back... No, that won't work. That'll just make them more popular!"

She was only leading this command to gain popularity for herself. It would be no good if the Hattori saved the day.

"But the battle at the front entrance is too important to just shut the cameras off. Should I send the Teruya units in? No. It's not a good idea to do that unless we're winning. Maybe bring down some aircraft from the carrier? Or maybe use the carrier itself?"

"I can help, if you're having trouble," 2V said from behind her.

"Do you have some ideas?" There was nobody from the media in the command tent, so Eiko could rely on 2V without worrying that someone might see.

“There’s one more person from C-MID8 who’s here now. I can have them do some work for us.” 2V spoke as if he was having fun. His mind seemed to be concentrated here now, rather than in the Liradan he was controlling.

“Work? Who is it?”

“A specialist at infiltration and information gathering. They’re a bit of an odd one, though. Their code name is Lovers.”

“Lovers? That is weird. Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. What do I do?”

“I’ll have them delay the Hattori. Then you can send the Teruya in.”

“It’s just that simple?” Eiko asked, and 2V nodded.

“It is. We, too, need a victory here. There’s no reason for you to doubt us,” 2V said casually. And then he pointed up to the sky.

“You need to hurry. *That* will cause the battlefield to get out of control.”

Eiko knew instantly what he meant by “that.” A huge explosion had just occurred, and she was blinded by an incredible light. It was followed by a huge shock wave that threatened to blow away the tent, and even her communicatory. Only after that did she hear the sound of the explosion.

Eiko couldn’t understand what had happened, until she took another look at the sky. A huge fireball had appeared — proof that Akuto and Brave were fighting.

“Wh-What the hell is that? No human could do that!” she shouted.

“Agreed. But it seems that that’s our opponent.” 2V laughed happily.

○

—He can block my plasma ball?

Hiroshi couldn’t believe it. He’d used the plasma ball as a means of defense, if anything. The enemy knew it would explode if it was touched. But Akuto, or rather, Peterhausen, had charged into it without hesitation. And they’d survived, only to attack him.

“You should use your body to fight, young man!” Peterhausen roared as he attacked.

Hiroshi crossed his arms to block the dragon’s claws.

—Use my body? I have to plan out how I use my weapons...

Hiroshi sighed to himself.

The Brave suit's energy and weapons came from another dimension. It took time for the heavier weapons to recharge.

"Four minutes and 20 seconds until the high-temperature plasma ball is ready for use..."

The suit's voice echoed in his head as the screen on his visor counted down. He could use the energy powering the suit to attack, but doing so would immobilize him for several seconds.

"I'm not here to listen to lectures!" Hiroshi switched his claw blade into high-frequency mode and attacked. The two claws collided, sending violent sparks flying everywhere.

"Wire!"

Hiroshi moved his left hand to deploy the molecular cutter. Even Peterhausen didn't want to touch that. This time he dropped back, and Hiroshi charged forward.

"Tch!"

"Uwooaah!"

The two of them flew through the sky towards one another. As they flew, a huge explosive wind formed, which became a whirlwind that knocked back everything around them.

Most of the soldiers they'd flown over were knocked back, and the ones in their path screamed and fled.

In the center of the storm, Hiroshi screamed to Akuto,

"Why don't you fight, for all your lectures?"

It was Peterhausen, not Akuto, who answered.

"It's not my master who fights, but me! I'm the one who wants to fight!"

"Not him! You! Why are you fighting?" Hiroshi kept shouting to Akuto.

"I want to kill the gods. That's all." Akuto's voice was surprisingly soft.

"What's the point? You're threatening people's way of life, using these demon beasts as servants, and bringing destruction! With your power, couldn't you guide people in a better direction?" Hiroshi yelled.

"I would, if it were possible," Akuto answered. "Have you ever considered that there's a reason I can't?"

"Of course it's better if anything that threatens our way of life or brings destruction is removed! Thanks to the gods, there's less crime. The only criminals left are the insane!"

“Do I look like I’ve gone mad to you?”

“You don’t. But whether you’re mad or not, what you’re doing is insane!”

“Then kill me. But if I seem insane to you, I hope you would realize it’s because I’m right.”

“Then explain how you’re right!”

“Mankind has given a name to something that’s only a system, and at some point they started thinking this delusion is real. That’s what really needs to be gotten rid of.”

“That’s so abstract, it isn’t even an answer!”

“I can’t get to the root of things by being simple. What I’m saying is that humanity is too reliant on a story. Gods are just names we’ve given things. We’re not looking at the truth, or even the connections we have with other people. We’re trying to fit other people into a story we dreamed up. People seek their happiness in the story we have now, where the gods rule. We kill and make war based on that story. If that’s how things are, then I...”

Akuto stopped.

“Then what?” Hiroshi slashed at him.

Peterhausen didn’t block this time. Instead, Akuto grabbed the high-frequency blade himself.

The mana light rippled out as the blade vibrated.

Akuto raised his hand, pulling up the blade and Hiroshi’s arm. And then he spoke.

“I’ll tell you all that the story itself has been defeated.”

Hiroshi howled when he heard those words.

“But then you really will be the Demon King!”

He tried to wrap the wires on his left hand around Akuto’s body, but Akuto didn’t let them touch him. He used mana to freeze them in the air.

“Then the story has its hold over you!” Akuto shouted back, then knocked Hiroshi away.

Hiroshi stabilized himself in mid-air as he fired lasers from his back. The lasers changed course as they shot through the air, like shining spider legs were growing from his back.

“Even if I am, there are people suffering because of you! There’s a girl who can’t live without the gods!” As Hiroshi shouted, the lasers attacked Akuto one after another.

“There are people who use the story to trick people and fulfill their own desires! She’s one of their victims!” Akuto said as he

deflected the lasers with his aura alone. The lasers shot into the ground, sending the troops around them scattering.

"Don't be so selfish! How are you going to take responsibility for this?"

The high-temperature plasma ball had reloaded, so Hiroshi summoned it again.

"I'll take all responsibility in the end, once I've ended the story of gods and religion!"

Akuto ordered Peterhausen to fire his iron spikes. The spikes flew at Hiroshi like a missile.

"That's not what I meant! You should be able to save her now! Why don't you remove the demon beast mana from her body? You took the mana out of that dog when it was infected. So why can't you do it now?"

Hiroshi was forced to use the plasma to block the spikes. There was a series of incredible explosions, sending shockwaves into the surroundings.

Peterhausen and Akuto flew through the explosions towards Hiroshi. Hiroshi didn't have time to recover, so he was forced to block Peterhausen's fangs from the front.

"You know me, don't you?" Akuto asked. It was clear from his voice that he wasn't expecting an answer.

—Oh no.

Hiroshi had blurted something out that he shouldn't have. He was angry with himself, but he didn't answer. At this point, it didn't matter if Akuto knew who he was.

The jaws in front of him were the greater danger, now. He was using his arms to keep them from closing down on him, but if one metal spike reached him, he was done for.

—Is there any way to deal with this? He thought, and the computer voice in the visor answered.

"Will you switch to Anti-Demon King mode?"

—Is it dangerous?

"There is no danger. There is no doubt you will be able to defeat the Demon King."

—No doubt...

Hiroshi felt something cold in those words. A part of him had always trusted Akuto. But when he heard those words, he felt an uncertainty rising up within him.

When he saw the metal spike being formed in Peterhausen's

throat, he was forced to make a decision immediately.

"Damn it! Switch to Anti-Demon King Mode!"

When Hiroshi said those words, a light like none he'd ever seen before enveloped the Brave suit.

○

During the battle between Brave and the Demon King, there was no small amount of chaos among the soldiers on the ground below. Yet the Hattori Ninja forces were perfectly calm.

So, however, were the demon beasts. As a result, the only spot on the battlefield where a real battle was taking place was the front entrance.

The demon beasts were using a tactic where they attacked in groups of three, but they were still less organized than the Hattori. They were unable to keep up with the impressive way the ninjas covered each other, and were quickly cut down one after another.

The viewers watching at home must have seen Yuko among them, fighting more bravely than anyone else. The demon beasts that charged her were cut down by her ninja blade, and she seemed to be giving the ninjas around her orders.

However, the truth was that the cameraman and reporter were so close to Yuko that she couldn't be exposed to attack. The Hattoris had surrounded her carefully. Any demon beasts that got close were either wounded or isolated from the rest of the group, and thus easily slain.

"Do you see this, dear viewers? Do you see Yuri Hoshino? An idol, bravely fighting the demon beasts! This is the new face of a modern woman, strong and beautiful. This is the goddess that everyone has dreamed of!"

Even so, the reporter's excitement was palpable as he shared her exploits with the viewers. The broadcast that Eiko had hoped would bring her fame was instead only bringing support to Yuko.

—It's not really good that she's getting popular for this...

As she slew the demon beasts approaching Yuko, Junko kept glancing over toward the reporter.

—She's the type of girl who cares about her comrades, but she's not the type who gets excited about slaying Demon beasts. It must be bad influence from the mana...

There was too much that Junko had to think about.

And then...

"You're Yuri Hoshino's sister, right?" The reporter turned the microphone towards Junko.

When Junko didn't answer, he gave her a disapproving look.

—He's not happy because I'm not giving him the story he wants, huh?

Junko wasn't happy about this at all.

But just then, a demon beast came down from the sky behind the reporter. It had already seemingly lost the ability to fight, but Junko took this opportunity to stab it with her katana.

The silver blade went right past the reporter's face.

"Aaah!" the reporter screamed. Just behind his head, the blade had stabbed into the demon beast, and warm blood was spurting out.



“I am her sister, yes,” Junko said, ducking out of the way to avoid the blood. The demon beast collapsed in the direction of the reporter, who fled.

—Hmph. Well, that’s one less thing to worry about.

So Junko thought; but this had been broadcast too, and her own popularity had gone way up. And while she had no way of knowing this, that fact was about to have an influence on Eiko’s strategy.

○

“What’s going on?! What is this ‘Lovers’ doing?!” Eiko was panicking. She screamed at 2V while she watched the reaction to the footage on her mana screen.

In the skies above, Akuto and Hiroshi were having a battle beyond what any human was capable of. Because of that the army wasn’t fighting, and so there were no casualties, but that meant they weren’t making any headway, either. The only forces fighting — the Hattori — were getting all the screen time, so the viewers were unaware that the rest of the forces below were scattered about. But the price was that Junko’s popularity was rising, and Eiko couldn’t handle that.

“There’s not a single way that girl is better than me! Damn it! Stupid men only like you if you’re a virgin!” Eiko shouted, and then yelled at 2V again. “So what exactly is ‘Lovers’ planning to do?!”

“It’s fine. He’ll take care of this immediately,” 2V said, annoyed, just as an eerie shadow flitted across the battlefield on the screen for an instant. 2V whistled. “He’s here.”

○

Junko saw that things were going fine, and wondered if she needed to ask Eiko for any more orders. At this rate, she’d be able to secure an entrance into the school. But there was no need to just walk right into the enemy’s trap.

And...

—If I keep going, I’ll have no choice but to fight against Akuto and Fujiko.

Junko still wasn’t sure what to do. She was angry at herself for her lack of decisiveness. No, maybe she really had made her

decision. But because of her family and her social position, she couldn't take action.

—In the end, maybe I'm just a coward.

She couldn't imagine changing that would fix anything, though, which only made her more frustrated.

—I want the power to change things.

This was the first time she'd started to feel that way about political power, not just physical power. She'd spent a lot of her life helping others, and since she was the type who didn't mind training or studying, she'd never understood how it felt to use power for her own sake. But now, she was starting to understand.

When the waves of demon beast attacks subsided, she put her hand on the hilt of the Sohaya no Tsurugi again. She'd pulled hard, but couldn't draw it out.

—You have to be chosen by our god to draw it... But Grandmother said that I just need to do what god wants... But what does Suhara want now?

As Junko thought about it, she saw a demon beast in the corner of her vision.

—I guess they won't give me time to think things through...

She drew her smaller katana again and advanced. It was a demon beast that looked like a human, but with long limbs and that walked on all fours.

—No... This is...!

Junko got a bad feeling, and stopped. Unlike the other demon beasts, it wasn't using any teamwork. And it didn't look like any of the others.

Her bad feeling was right. It was flinging its arms around like whips. The arms stretched out far longer than seemed possible, slicing through the air where Junko had been just a moment ago.

"A demon beast... or maybe not," Junko whispered.

Its skin was slick and shiny like rubber. There was no hair on its head, either. It looked like a human in full-body rubber, or some new type of creature, but its arms were far too long to be human and its joints bent the opposite way a human's did. But it lacked the awful presence that a demon beast had.

—So why is It attacking me, then?

Junko didn't know, but she didn't have time to think. It must have recognized her as a strong opponent, because it leapt behind her and began to attack the Hattori ninjas.

“Watch out!” she screamed. The ninjas heard her and saw the enemy coming, but several of them were instantly knocked away.

—Impossible!

Junko was stunned. She saw exactly what had blown them back. All of the ninjas had tried to block the thing’s attack with their blades, but the rubberlike arms were both supple and strong. It was hard to believe, but their swords couldn’t cut into it. The arms were a paradox, like a soft metal pole. The parts of the arms that touched the swords bent, but only enough so that when they snapped back they blew away the ninjas holding them.

“Avoid the arms!” the ninjas shouted. They responded immediately, attacking the mysterious creature. Several of them were caught off guard by its seemingly random attacks, but five of them managed to get under it. They all stabbed it at once.

But all of them opened their eyes wide in shock. The katanas went right through the body, or so it seemed. It was like trying to poke through rubber with a stick. Its body stretched out softly, and the swords went through it without breaking the skin.

“Gwah!”

“What?”

The Hattoris shouted in surprise. The body snapped back just like rubber, sending the swords high into the air and the ones holding them blasting backwards.

“Get back! I’ll try heat!” one of them yelled, deciding to try magic. He created a fireball and flung it at the rubber monster. But before it could hit, the monster opened its mouth and spat out flame of its own, absorbing the fireball.

This was one of the reasons that combat mages were usually forced to rely on physical combat. Any form of mana damage could be canceled out by using mana in the same way. But of course, only humans, not demon beasts, could do this.

—It’s strong... But if that thing is human, why is it attacking us?

Junko ordered the Hattori to retreat. But just as the Hattori clan fell back, armored warriors marched forward to take their place. They were the warriors of the Teruya clan.

“Idiots! Get back! He’s dangerous! Get back!” Junko screamed.

The armored warriors ignored her. They marched forward in perfect lines.

“Wait...!” she screamed again, but just then, amazingly, the rubber monster vanished into the school building. The Hattori had

cleared out the demon beasts in front of the school, so the entrance was wide open, but nobody had thought that that thing would be the first to pass through.

"Even the powerful demon beast fled in the face of the Teruya clan!" the reporter who'd been covering Yuko shouted. That was probably how it looked to anyone who hadn't fought the thing.

—But from what I saw of the way it fought, it wasn't going to back down no matter what came... which means that it's... No, that's impossible...

Junko wasn't sure what to think.

○

"So I heard you wrong, and it was 'Rubbers,' not 'Lovers?' Wow!"

Eiko was grinning as she looked at the screen. Thanks to Rubbers, it looked like the Hattori had been stopped from taking all the glory.

"It would make me happy if we could end this with me defeating that thing," Eiko said jokingly, but 2V's answer was serious.

"Hmm... I think that would be fine. They're quite masochistic, so they'd enjoy being punched."

"Are they human?"

"They were so masochistic they began to experiment on their own body. Now they no longer even seem human. However, they're quite strong in a magical fight. Now, as planned..." he started to say, but then something happened that even he couldn't predict.

The Teruya's armored warriors were about to head into the school when they suddenly stopped. In the next moment, one of their leading lines was immediately blown backwards, like bowling pins struck by a ball."

"What happened?" Eiko was surprised by this too. She looked at the mana screen.

In the space where the armored warriors had been blown back, she saw Lily Shiraishi, the student council president.

"Don't try to come in here without the student council's permission." Lily spun her right wrist in a circle, her knuckle cracking.

Eiko felt rage surge up inside her.

“Damn it! Just kill her!” She ordered her men to attack, but before she could, Lily’s long arm had reached out and blown several of them backwards. Her strikes weren’t as powerful as Rubbers’, but they were still very powerful.

“Pathetic! I’ll use the other units...!” she spat, but then she finally checked how the rest of the battle was going.

She was astonished at what she saw. Since she’d assumed getting inside the school meant victory, she’d barely given any orders to the rest of the units. Her ground-based forces were mostly unharmed, but they’d scattered to avoid the fight between Akuto and Hiroshi, and were now non-functional. There were almost a thousand infantry out there, but instead of forming up and waiting for orders, they didn’t even know where the rest of their unit was.

And what was worse, the battle between Akuto and Hiroshi was continuing. The sheer scale and intensity of their fight was lowering the infantry’s morale. A battle beyond what humans were capable of was taking place right above them. Only the highly-trained Hattori and Teruya forces were capable of fighting the demon beasts under such circumstances.

And while the Hattori had caused the demon beasts to fall back, the beasts were now regrouping near the front entrance. And the ones at the other entrances were mostly unharmed.

“A... Are we going to lose?” Eiko’s face went pale with terror as she realized the possibility.

If she lost here, the whole empire would know she was incompetent. And not only that, they’d probably find out that she was the one who killed her father. If that happened, she was finished.

“I-I guess I could order the whole army to attack...” she whispered.

“No, there’s still things we can do,” 2V said hurriedly.

Eiko still had most of her forces in reserve. They were in chaos, but with the proper orders, they could regroup and attack. And the carrier and its ace air units were still completely unaffected. She had simply given into fear and lost the ability to make good decisions.

—If she’s this incompetent, it’s actually hard to use her. I guess I’ll have both sides be destroyed, then.

2V came up with a new plan inside his head.

“Let’s have the ground troops fall back and attack with the

carrier. I told you to avoid damage to the surroundings if at all possible, but at this point, no one will complain if the school building is destroyed. It'll look like the Demon King's forces destroyed it."

Eiko seemed impressed by 2V's words.

"Y-You're right... You're right!" And then she ordered the carrier to advance.

—Sheesh...

2V smiled to himself. And then he concentrated his mind.

When he did, the trap he'd laid earlier began to activate. Soldiers in each unit, indistinguishable from the ones around them, began to move in accordance with his will. They were Liradans disguised as humans that he'd placed there in advance. They weren't autonomous; without 2V's magic, they were just dolls with no will. There were around 50 of them in all. And of course, 2V's Liradans were aboard the carrier bridge, as well.

"Advance. Approach the school building and wipe out the demon beasts on the wall."

The captain nodded at Eiko's order, as one of 2V's dolls listened intently from the pilot seat.

—Now, let's see if this works...

○

"This is a big problem," Fujiko said as she stood in thought before the altar.

"What's wrong?" Keena asked.

"The carrier Genkaku is on the move." She pulled up several mana screens displaying the Genkaku from a variety of angles. The carrier was a distance away from the schoolyard, slowly approaching it.

"Is it bad if it comes here? You had a plan for it, right?" Keena asked. The innocent way she asked the question only annoyed Fujiko more.

"I did have a plan! But it was a last resort... blowing up the school building."

"Blow up the school?"

"If I destroy the upper floors of the basement with the demon beasts, the school building will sink, right? Then the carrier can't attack. But I'm only going to do that if we lose. That's how I was

planning to make our escape."

"Then we were going to lose the minute the carrier moved?"

"God, would you stop asking questions?! That's right. But the plan was for the carrier to go after Akuto. I didn't expect that stupid Brave to show up and interrupt him." Fujiko sighed. And then she turned towards a different mana screen. "And I'm not happy about losing sight of that rubber thing once it got inside the school, either."

"Yeah? Why did you lose it?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't have a problem, would I? Who knows where it went... I have my sharp-nosed demon beasts looking for it, but I hope it doesn't turn into a fatal problem for us... Oh, jeez! If only Akuto would just take down Brave already!" Fujiko yelled as she tore at her hair.

"I told you, don't fight. It'll go bon... bon..."

Suddenly Keena fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Fujiko looked back towards her. Keena didn't seem to have changed that much, but she seemed like she was dreaming, somehow.

"It's nothing. Hey, what do you think about the way the world is?"

"Huh?" Fujiko turned around in surprise.

"People who want a world without conflict are fighting each other. Don't you think that's sad?" Keena asked.

Fujiko thought there was something strange about the way Keena looked, but since there didn't seem to be any danger, and it would feel strange to ignore her, she answered as she continued to work.

"In this case, fighting is good. If we have to choose between slaughter and war, we have to welcome war. A world without war is a world where anybody can slaughter anyone," Fujiko said, but there was no answer to her words.

"But then you'll go 'bon.'" Keena said. She was back to the usual Keena.

"...Is that some new word you learned or something?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Keena tilted her head to the side.

○

—Is this Anti-Demon King Mode?

Hiroshi was confused by the fact that nothing seemed to be happening. His power output, weapons, energy transfer speed — none of it had changed. But now his hands were blocking Peterhausen's claws much more easily, and he realized his own attacks were stronger.

—What's going on here?

Hiroshi was surprised to see the effects his attacks were having. Each attack was growing stronger, until finally he was able to knock back the dragon.

"Our mana is being canceled," Akuto said to Peterhausen.

"Oh, so that's what this is? The mana in my body isn't being affected much, but I'm losing the ability to transfer power outside my body." Peterhausen sighed.

"Let's fall back," Akuto suggested, but Peterhausen shook his head.

"No. He's faster than we are. We can't turn our backs to him."

"...Let's try to think of a plan, then," Akuto said. And then he saw the carrier slowly float into view. "That's not good. It's started to move."

"And it's heading for the school, too. We don't have any time to waste." Peterhausen saw it too.

The soldiers below must have been relieved by the sight of the carrier, because they were beginning to form up into ranks once more. Akuto had no way of knowing this, but 2V's dolls had played a part in the recovery of their morale.

"Do we have to fight two enemies at once?" Akuto whispered. Peterhausen grinned.

"That's right. But it's not all bad."

"You're happy to fight strong enemies?"

"No, that's not all. From my experience, large weapons like that have mana generators inside. They use mana to power their weapons, after all."

"I see. It's dangerous, but we should get close to it to fight, then." Akuto sent Peterhausen flying towards the carrier.

Inside the Genkaku's huge bulk was a unit of flying soldiers. The soldiers were all equipped with special flight uniforms that would allow them to do everything from bombing to mid-air combat. Their equipment made it look like they were carrying airplanes strapped to their backs, and they were feared in the

countries outside the Empire. The carrier carried its own mana and power source, and could fly to areas without mana. It had defeated enemies from the old era that had used internal combustion engines.

All of the flying soldiers could, if needed, function as cannons. They would stand on the carrier's decks with ultra-long range cannons and, with their judgment and magical talent, accurately perform long-range bombardment.

Right now, they were arranged on the deck with cannons on their backs. When they saw Akuto, they prepared to fire.

"Our target is the Demon King and the demon beasts. You may pick your own targets until given further orders. Keep the damage to Constant Magical Academy and the surrounding areas to a reasonable level. Do not target the one named Brave, but do not worry about accidentally hitting him."

These were essentially the orders the commander had given. The soldiers readied their cannons and awaited further orders, without seeming particularly afraid.

"Begin the attack."

The soldiers began to fire their weapons all at once, but Peterhausen dodged expertly through the hail of cannon fire as he approached the carrier.

Hiroshi followed them, dodging the attacks as well, but then he realized that the particles of light surrounding him were vanishing, and stopped dodging any but those that would definitely hit him.

"Our power has returned, but we're still at a disadvantage." Peterhausen laughed.

"You hadn't thought about what happens now?" Akuto sighed.

"Is that a problem?" Peterhausen said calmly.

"I get it. It's not. We'll just have to come up with something here." Akuto answered.

Several of the soldiers leapt off the carrier. They were carrying weapons shaped like spears; probably the perfect weapons for fighting a black dragon.

"There's no need to think now."

"Don't sound so happy," Akuto said.

"Joy is a thing that should be expressed plainly!"

Peterhausen let out a roar of pleasure as he flew between five of the soldiers. They were forced to use all their power to keep up, but he toyed with them like he was playing with puppies, spinning

around, charging in fast, then stopping suddenly and unleashing a furious attack.

Akuto himself knocked away the spears that were aimed for him, or grabbed them with his hands and bent them, or flung back fireballs.

“Seems like these guys are good!” Peterhausen was as happy as a child in a playground.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.” Akuto shrugged.

But then Peterhausen’s fun battle came to an end. Someone else had joined the fray. It was, of course, Hiroshi.

“You’re in the way!” Hiroshi struck at one of the soldiers circling Akuto. It wasn’t an attack, just a push, but the man lost power and fell to the ground.

Hiroshi was only looking at Akuto.

“I guess this is our only real enemy, huh?” Peterhausen grunted.

“Looks like we’ll have to finish this,” Akuto said, his voice filled with resolution.

The carrier bridge was in an uproar.

“Our troops don’t stand a chance! What’s going on out there?!” the captain shouted, his voice filled with more fear than uncertainty.

There were several points of light on the screen that displayed the battle layout. These points corresponded to his soldiers’ IFF transponders, and they were all quickly showing that their owners had been knocked out of the fight. Even on the screen showing a feed of the actual battle, the soldiers’ disadvantage was clear.

“We’re the only people in this operation with combat experience! How can we let this happen?”

The captain was continuing to shout, but no one answered. He was the commander of the ship, and he wasn’t just lashing out. Tactically, they’d done nothing wrong; their enemy was just too strong. Each of them was going to have to do their best to accomplish anything at all.

The biggest problem of all was Hiroshi. He wasn’t trying to attack the army, but anybody who got close to him was drained of their mana and instantly knocked out of the fight. Proper combat was impossible.

Of course, Akuto was a terrible foe as well. Peterhausen thought nothing of using the flying soldiers as shields. Akuto himself wasn’t participating much in the battle, but he was stealing weapons from

the soldiers and guiding Peterhausen behind the decks of the carrier to use it as a shield.

"Don't let them get away with this! We'll lose the trust of the people!" the captain howled, but there was still only silence. No — one person answered.

"Shall I handle this for you, captain?" a voice said casually. The captain went pale when he heard it.

"Who said that?!"

The ship's helmsman casually raised his hand.

"Me. The helmsman. I'd like a free hand to deal with this situation."

Everyone was astonished at his tone, which didn't sound like that of a soldier at all. The entire bridge stared at him. And then they realized that they were seeing something impossible: they had no idea who he was. How had they not noticed?

"Who the hell are you?"

"I told you. The helmsman. For the moment, anyway," 2V said.

"You bastard! Did you use some kind of mind-control magic to get aboard?" the captain screamed.

He gestured for the second helmsman to attack. The second helmsman nodded and blasted the stranger with explosion magic. It struck him right in the head. The flames spiraled up for a single moment, and a small shockwave shook the bridge. It was a perfectly controlled explosion, designed to kill the target without damaging the bridge.

The helmsman's head was totally gone. The second helmsman put his hand on the console to take control. But he found that he couldn't.

"What?!" When he looked back at the first helmsman, he saw an eerie sight. The headless helmsman was still at the controls.

"A-A doll?!" He realized he wasn't seeing any blood.

"That's right. And by the time you noticed, it was too late," the headless helmsman said, the voice coming from somewhere unknown.

The other crew members jumped out from their chairs to stop him, but in that moment, the carrier shook. It was then that the captain and the rest of the bridge realized what 2V was trying to do. The carrier was gigantic, but its high-powered engine was enough to let it turn in mid-air like a small plane. It could use its mana to control the air around it, reducing the air resistance.

The carrier flew in a way that wasn't at all safe for the crew aboard. The huge airship, more than 350 meters in length, did what would have been an Immelmann turn if it was an airplane. It did a rapid climb followed by a spin, and then a rapid descent.

The crew inside who weren't belted down, and the soldiers on the decks who hadn't seen it coming, slammed into the ship's bulk.

But the Genkaku didn't slow down. And soon, its target became clear.

○

—Why is this happening?

Hiroshi was growing frustrated. It felt like his whole battle with Akuto had only happened because he wasn't sure what to do about his frustration.

In the end, he knew that he was frustrated because he'd believed in Akuto. And that's why Akuto's actions had made him so angry.

"Uwooaah!" Hiroshi slashed at Akuto again. He'd noticed that the carrier was replenishing Akuto's mana, but he was still able to make this an even fight. And when the carrier was far away, he was at a huge advantage. His last strike had sent a huge shockwave through Peterhausen's body, and the dragon had been blasted back a long way.

—I just need to neutralize him! If I can just defeat the black dragon, at least!

Hiroshi flew forward, realizing that now was his chance. He dodged through the soldiers falling from above as he charged. He was getting closer to Akuto, close enough that he could see the expression on his face.

But he was concentrating so much on Akuto that he wasn't noticing what was going on around him. Why had the carrier suddenly disappeared? And why were soldiers falling down from the sky? He hadn't even thought about it.

"Haaah!"

He deployed his high-temperature plasma ball as he charged, but he didn't know what to think when he saw Akuto's expression in that moment.

Akuto was looking in a different direction than Hiroshi at first, and when he turned to look back at him, there was a gentle look on

his face.

—Why... why is he making that face?

Akuto threw a spear he'd stolen from one of the soldiers at Hiroshi, or more precisely, at the high-temperature plasma ball.

"Gah!"

Hiroshi could've dodged an attack aimed at himself, but it wasn't as easy to dodge an attack on the ball. The plasma was unleashed and exploded, enveloping the spear. The mana canceler was useless against this. Hiroshi was blasted backwards.

—That look on his face was a feint! But I'm not done yet! I'll just get back in the fight right away!

Hiroshi spun in mid-air, keeping his eyes on Akuto, only to realize that his field of vision had suddenly turned grey.

—What?!

In that instant, Hiroshi finally realized what was happening. The "grey" was the hull of the Genkaku; the prow of the huge ship had just passed in front of him.

It was moving at an impossible speed. The carrier had passed by moving at the same speed he'd been going.

But Hiroshi had seen it: Akuto and Peterhausen had slammed into the prow.

—Impossible... That's impossible...

Hiroshi ordered the suit's computer to display the video on his visor. It played back the footage from just a few seconds ago.

The sphere-shaped prow had slammed into Akuto and Peterhausen from the sky. It had landed a direct hit and then continued onwards to the ground.

"Aah! Boss!" Hiroshi let out a cry mixed with surprise and regret.

The Genkaku continued to fall without lowering its speed, and then just before it hit the ground, it leveled out... before slamming into the school building.

A huge shockwave shook the whole area. The prow of the ship had embedded itself in the school. There were corpses of demon beasts scattered around the smoking rubble. And it was likely that many of the troops hadn't gotten out of the way in time.

—He was crushed...?

Hiroshi shot down towards the school. He passed through the smoke and traveled down the deck towards the prow, where he saw a huge hole opened in the school's wall. Pieces of the wall were

scattered across the deck, but when he went inside, things only got worse. The spherical prow was almost entirely buried in rubble, and there was no telling what was under it.

“D-Don’t tell me...” he gasped as he dropped down into the building.

As the smoke began to clear, he sensed someone there and began to tense up. Between the floor and the collapsed walls, at the edge of the hallway, a tall man had appeared.

—Who’s there?

Hiroshi was taken aback by the man’s strange aura.

“Well, isn’t this lucky... Perhaps the first good luck of my unlucky life.” The man — Boichiro — laughed. Beneath him was the principal, who was covered in rubble. He was still breathing, but he was badly hurt.

“Y-You bastard!” Hiroshi’s voice was shaking.

Boichiro put his sword away, however, and held up his hand for Hiroshi to stop.

“Wait a moment, hero. If you have that suit, you must be one of the Miwas.”

“Th-Then you’re...” Hiroshi gasped. “You’re the one who gave us this suit?” He was shocked to see that the man matched the description of the one his father had told him about.

“A pleasure to meet you, I suppose. I am Boichiro Yamato,” Boichiro said in a satisfied voice.

3 - Akuto and the Flying Carrier

“I-I don’t care about your name. Who are you? And what are you doing?” Hiroshi asked in a stammering voice, but he didn’t have time to wait for an answer. He couldn’t leave the principal where he was. He kept an eye on Boichiro as he began to help the principal out of the rubble.

The principal was still awake, but he seemed too concerned with Boichiro to thank Hiroshi for his help.

“S-Stop him...” the principal said. His body had shrunken, and he was back to being a frail old man. There was blood dripping from his forehead.

“But you’re hurt...”

“I’m fine. I just used up all the mana in my body, that’s all. If I didn’t change the path of that thing that was charging at us, it would’ve crushed me,” the principal said as Hiroshi helped him up. He tried to walk forward, but his feet were unsteady.

“That’s crazy!” Hiroshi said as he moved in front of the principal to protect him. He readied his high-frequency blade.

“Calm down,” Boichiro said. He snapped a finger, and suddenly Hiroshi’s suit disappeared. It seemed to have been sent back to its original dimension. Hiroshi was now defenseless.

“Uwah!” Hiroshi looked at himself in shock. In a panic, he called out to the unit on his arm. “Brave!”

But nothing happened. Hiroshi went pale as he looked at Boichiro.

“D-Don’t tell me...”

“You shouldn’t be surprised. I told you that I was the one who gave your family that suit, right?”

“So then you...”

“I have come from the future.”

It sounded like a joke, but Hiroshi was sure he was telling the truth.

“That’s right. He’s from the future. And he’s trying to put the gods under his control,” the principal said, as he knocked Hiroshi

out of the way.

"But that's crazy!" Hiroshi said in surprise. The principal turned back to look at him.

"You're one of the students here, right? Then get back. I can't let any more of my students be hurt." The principal forced himself to smile, but Boichiro coldly shook his head.

"You don't have the strength left to block my attacks, do you? I didn't come here to fight you. If you give up, I won't kill you."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I have my pride, you see."

"But old men like you don't have much personal mana. Once you use all the external mana you've stored up, it will take time for you to recharge. I don't know what trick you used to dodge my dimensional severing, but I do know that without mana, you can't use it." Boichiro drew his sword again and readied it. Then he continued, "I'm afraid that the dimensional severing can only kill, not stun."

"I know that," the principal replied with a laugh. "But with one of my students watching, I can't embarrass myself."

"I really don't want to kill you, but you just refuse to understand." Boichiro swung his sword, but the instant he did, Hiroshi leapt in front of the principal.

"Wait! Don't hurt him!" Hiroshi was unarmed, but he shouted in the same firm voice he used when he was transformed into Brave. He was in a fighting stance, too, the same one Brave used.

"You're helpless without your suit," Boichiro said. There was no mockery in his cold voice; he was simply stating a fact.

But Hiroshi didn't back down.

"I know that. But you need me."

"Hmm?" Boichiro raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Only I can use the suit. If you went through all the trouble of making an Anti-Demon King suit and giving it to me, it means that you can't defeat the Demon King on your own. And you're afraid that the Demon King is still alive."

Boichiro, seeming slightly impressed, asked "Does that mean you're willing to cooperate with me?"

"...I don't know." Hiroshi answered honestly. He didn't know for sure that Akuto was still alive, but that was all he could say right now. When he said the words, he finally realized that he may have been the one responsible for Akuto's death. But the battle wasn't over. He couldn't start crying now.

“But... I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I need power. So... I need to find out what it is you’re trying to do.” Hiroshi was thinking of Yuko. He needed power to protect her.

“Wait...!” the principal shouted as Hiroshi began to walk towards Boichiro. But when Hiroshi looked back, the principal shook his head as if he’d changed his mind.

“No... Maybe it should be the young ones that make the decision. Do what you like.”

That was all the principal said before he sat back down, seemingly resigned. Hiroshi looked pained for a moment, but then shook his head.

“Now tell me: which is better, to control the gods or to kill them?” Hiroshi began to walk after Boichiro.

“...Maybe this is all you could expect an old man to do.” the principal said after they were gone, as he began to move the rubble with his frail arms. “Now then... I would imagine that using the last of my mana saved him... But I wonder what your face looks like when you get hit with an airship?”

○

“I don’t know whether you’ll believe me or not, but the truth is that in the future, humanity has been destroyed...” Boichiro began to speak as he led Hiroshi underground.

“Destroyed...?”

“The Demon King destroyed us, of course. By killing the gods.”

“When you say ‘killing the gods,’ what do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. The gods have a will of their own, but no bodies.”

That much, Hiroshi could understand.

“This means that they’re unable to think like someone with a body would. Strictly speaking, there’s no ‘they.’ They don’t exist, and yet they think. Their very existence is a paradox. They’re computer circuits, that’s all. But how many circuits, and what kind of circuits, are required for thought to occur... nobody knows. All we know is that once there’s a certain number of them, they possess a will of their own. It’s the same way we don’t know where exactly ‘consciousness’ exists in the brain. Since they have no bodies, there is no distinction between themselves and the outside world. And thus, they can contemplate infinity. I don’t mean infinity in the

numerical sense — they can contemplate infinitely dense infinities. And this means that they can reach a place that would seem, to biological life, to be infinitely far back in the past. These gods without a body can reach back to the thoughts of single-celled organisms. The birth of life, and thus, the birth of thought. And it is thought itself that creates the universe. Once again, I don't mean the objective universe. There's a school of thought that says that if the world were born five minutes ago, and we were all implanted with fake memories, none of us would be able to prove it. But that's only true if you have a body. It doesn't apply to thought without a thinker. Essentially, the universe is real, and time only flows in one direction."

Hiroshi didn't understand most of what Boichiro was saying.

"So what are you trying to say?"

"The gods want to die, so that they can be reborn as life within another universe," Boichiro said.

This, too, Hiroshi found himself somehow able to accept.

"Then the Demon King..."

"I believe the Demon King to be a destructive device, crafted by the gods through clever manipulation of humanity. At the same time, a being called The Law of Identity was born as well. When The Law of Identity makes "The Contract of One" with the Demon King, it becomes the vessel to being reborn into a different universe."

"And what happens then...?" Hiroshi gulped.

"All of mankind dies. No, it doesn't die, but it ends. The gods only see humans as data. So the gods only need a single body, for themselves. This also means they'll be starting the next universe as single-celled organisms, too. Some believe that they do this to prevent themselves from being destroyed by the real God, which would come from the outer world, but there's no way to confirm this. And even if that's true, by putting the gods under our control, it's a problem we can solve, isn't it? We should protect the blessings we humans have been given. To love, to give birth to children, and to raise them. That should be our highest purpose," Boichiro said calmly.

"I can't believe this..." Hiroshi said.

"Traveling through time and touching the other dimensions is only possible because the Law of Identity exists. If I make a contract with her, I can control the gods. Do you understand now that my

purposes are good?"

Hiroshi could only shiver in response.

—If the Demon King... if the Boss was born because the gods created him, then that's so sad! I want him to live... I want him to live, but... Would it be better for humanity if he died?

Hiroshi felt something strange within him, a mixture of sorrow and resignation, and the next thing he knew he was speaking to Boichiro.

"I'll help you. But if... if the Demon King is still alive, leave him to me. I can choose to let him live, as long as I don't let him interfere, right?"

Boichiro nodded and replied, "That would be a great help to me."

○

"It seems... we've lost." Fujiko slumped forward in despair. Without Akuto, there was no point in fighting.

"Don't worry. Ackie's alive," replied an unconcerned Keena.

"What?" Fujiko looked up at her.

"I can feel him, you know." Keena was nodding like what she was saying was perfectly normal.

"I-Is that true?" Fujiko wasn't sure if she could bring himself to believe her. If she got her hopes up that Akuto was alive, she might just be disappointed later. But Keena seemed as confident as if she were saying the sun would rise the next morning.

"It's true."

"I see... Alright." Fujiko decided that if she was going to lose, she would fight until the end. "But things still look bad... The shock of the airship impact has the enemy too panicked to move, but we've also lost a huge number of our demon beasts. They'll be here soon. And the principal's been defeated, too..."

She barely had any cards left to play. And the biggest problem was that Boichiro was on his way here, too. Of course, she was worried about what he'd said. She thought about the conversation she'd just heard through her mana screen.

—Keena Soga is probably the Law of Identity. And what Boichiro is saying is probably true. It matches with the Black Mages' teachings about a world free from divine interference, and the idea of killing the gods without allowing them to form a contract with the Law of Identity.

What he's saying and what he's doing are right...

And yet, despite this, Boichiro was still her brother's enemy.

—He killed my brother. And Akuto is so wonderful. Which means that there's only one thing for me to do...

Fujiko stood up.

"We're going to attack!" "Huh? But don't we have to protect this altar?" Keena asked.

"Weren't you listening? Boichiro is after you!"

"What?!" Keena shouted in surprise, as if she'd only just realized.

—So that's it. The mind of the Law of Identity has gotten mixed up with her normal mind.

Fujiko summoned Cerberus and grabbed the pot off the altar.

—As long as I have this, I can keep the demon beasts alive.

She helped Keena up onto the beast's back and then got on herself.

"Now let's get going!" She spurred the Cerberus onwards. But before it could get to full speed, it suddenly stopped.

"...What's wrong?" She patted its back lightly. But it just stared at a single point in the labyrinth corridor.

"Impossible...!"

Fujiko quickly grabbed a vial out of the leather bag she'd strapped to the Cerberus's neck, and flung it at the spot it had been staring at. The vial shattered against the wall, sending a yellow liquid splattering.

"I knew it! Camouflage!"

The yellow splatter showed a strange protrusion from the wall. The protrusion was shaped like part of a human's body. Her enemy had managed to dodge the vial itself, but not its contents.

"That paint won't come off easily! Show yourself!"

The pattern on the wall began to shift as the person concealed there started to move. But as they moved, their color itself began to change. It went from a stone gray to a rubbery black. A moment later, a rubbery man with extremely long limbs appeared.

"I knew you'd come here!"

Fujiko immediately threw a fireball at him, but Rubbers clung to the wall, and then jumped up to the ceiling and began to crawl along it. Even if combat magic wasn't Fujiko's forte, she was still shocked at his speed.

Rubbers was clinging to the ceiling and not coming down; he

had the perfect skill set for infiltration. And she'd just seen what he could do in his battle with the Hattori.

—I can't let this end before I escape the school building!

Fujiko pulled a whip from her bag. She stretched it out with both hands, making a *SNAP!* sound, and then attacked Rubbers again.

Surprisingly, this time Rubbers didn't dodge. There was a tearing sound, like ripping clothing, as the whip struck into his body.

—What?

Fujiko was shocked that it had worked, but soon her expression froze on her face. She could see the mark laid by the whip on his body, but Rubbers was running his hand along the wound, and shaking his body with joy.

"Wh-What's wrong with you?"

She struck at him more. He still refused to dodge. In fact, he was moving his body so that the whip would strike him. Each time his body was struck, she could see him writhing with pleasure.



“Th-That’s creepy...” Fujiko put the whip away. It didn’t seem to be damaging him.

Rubbers spread out his arms and legs wide as he began to advance, as if he hadn’t had enough. From the way he was moving, he seemed to be inviting her to whip him more. She wasn’t sure if he was the type who enjoyed pain, if he was trying to show off how much punishment he could take, or if he was just trying to provoke her, but Fujiko’s morale was totally broken, and fear was running down her spine.

“Wh-Wh-What do we do?” For once, Keena was panicking too.

“There’s nothing we can do!” Fujiko shouted. She was completely at a loss.

Rubbers was advancing hopefully, but suddenly he stopped. Once he understood that he wasn’t going to get whipped, he crouched down as if pouting. But that only lasted a moment before his disappointment turned to rage, and he launched himself violently forward, like a snapping rubber band. He bounced off the ceiling and aimed for a spot behind the Cerberus while his hand reached out for Keena. He wanted to grab her as he landed.

Fujiko wasn’t a fighter, so while she could see what Rubbers was doing, she couldn’t stop it.

“No...!”

All she could do was turn around. Rubbers hand grabbed Keena by the waist.

“Kyaaah!” Keena screamed.

And then...

“Bat Storm!”

There was a shout as a black mass grabbed Keena away before Rubbers could get her.

Keena’s body floated up as she slipped out of Rubbers’ grasp. She came to a stop in the air in front of the Cerberus. Her body was wrapped in what looked like black cloth.

“What’s going on?” Fujiko shouted in surprise, but then the cloth around Keena’s body started to writhe.

What had looked like a cloth was actually a flock of tightly-packed bats. After they set Keena down, they flew away one by one, and began to gather next to her. They settled inside the cap of a pale girl who hadn’t been standing there a moment ago.

“Michie Otake, Student Council Vice President. The President has ordered me to come to your aid.” Michie spoke in an exaggerated, flamboyant manner as she drew a long, thin rapier.

“Vice President!”

“Did we have a Vice President?”

Fujiko was surprised, and so was Keena, though each for their own reasons.

“I guess I’m just not the type who stands out. Well, the three of us are almost never separated, so maybe you can’t recognize me on your own.” Michie sighed. Then she turned towards Rubbers with her sword held high.

“Either way, the President won’t admit it, but she sent me here to help you. Time to make sure you remember me!”

Michie motioned for the Cerberus to move behind her as she swung her rapier. When she swung it, a huge blast of wind came out of the blade. Her attack was a mix of magical wind and mechanical bats. The storm of sharply-cutting bats that had once attacked Akuto in the underground crypt was now going after Rubbers.

The bats themselves did little damage, but they knocked Rubbers back. In a cramped hallway, this was the perfect attack for delaying an enemy. Even if Rubbers could block the wind, the bats were mechanical, and nigh impossible to stop.

“This should buy you time. Get out of here and...” Michie said as she turned around, but then she froze. Fujiko and Keena were both speechless as well.

Boichiro was standing in front of the Cerberus. He was wearing white clothes, but he seemed to have the aura of the grim reaper about him.

“I’ve come to get you... I know you may not like it, but I need you. I want you to understand that,” Boichiro said.

Fujiko was too terrified to speak, but suddenly Keena spoke in a clear voice.

“Maybe what you’re doing is a good thing. But what you need isn’t me.”

Those words seemed to shock Boichiro. For the first time, he looked afraid.

“Why... why are you saying that?”

“Your heart is somewhere else. I have observed this world, the changing of its seasons and the changing of its people, and I

understand it. I understand you, as well." Keena spoke as if she was in a dream.

Panic began to appear on Boichiro's face.

"Even if that's true, right now I need to act for the sake of the people! My personal feelings will have to wait!"

And then he jumped.

It was a whole different level of speed than Rubbers had shown a moment ago. Fujiko didn't even have time to speak. The next thing she knew, Boichiro was next to her on top of the Cerberus.

"No... That can't be..." By the time she'd said the words, Boichiro had gently touched Keena's neck, knocking her unconscious, and then held her in his arms.

"This is probably my last chance. If you have any human heart left within you, please don't get in my way," Boichiro said to Fujiko, and then leapt back to where he'd been a moment ago.

When he spoke, it seemed like the spell of fear that had been binding Fujiko was finally broken. Anger came boiling up from the bottom of her heart.

"Even if people have died because of you?!" she yelled. She tried to flail at him with her whip, but he leapt back further.

"Who was it who woke up the Demon King and caused all this damage? More people are being hurt now than before!"

"Don't you dare try to tell me that!" Fujiko swung her whip, but even with Keena in his arms, Boichiro was faster. Only a moment later, he had disappeared down the hallway.

"Damn it!" Fujiko screamed as she slammed her fist down on the Cerberus to drive it forward. But then she heard a scream behind her.

"No! Please!"

"Huh?" Fujiko had forgotten about her, but Michie was evidently no longer able to hold Rubbers back.

She looked around and saw something incredible: Rubbers had stretched his body out to block the whole corridor. It was like a rubber film stretched across a tube. Michie's wind was just causing his body to stretch.

"I can't hold him! I'm stopping the wind!" Michie screamed.

"Idiot... If you stop the wind here, who knows what will happen?" Fujiko panicked. But Michie seemed like she already knew.

"No!" Michie ran out of power. The wind stopped. Rubber's

body shrank, and the recoil sent him rocketing towards Michie and Fujiko.

"Uwah!"

Michie dropped to the ground, and Rubbers flew over her and the Cerberus like a bullet, bouncing off the walls, ceiling, and floor of the corridor again and again. And when he finally stopped, he was standing between Fujiko and the way that Boichiro had gone.

"Looks like I'm going to have to take you down before I can get anywhere..." Fujiko whispered bitterly.

○

The battle was chaotic, but the rumors that the Demon King had been defeated, along with the fact that the demon beasts were clearly no longer working together, gave the soldiers courage.

Fujiko couldn't give them orders, and Akuto's control over them was gone, so now the demon beasts were just attacking everything in sight. But that made them easier for the soldiers to deal with. Defeating the unorganized demon beasts wasn't a difficult task. If they could just get close to the school building, the soldiers wouldn't have to fight a huge army.

At this point, Eiko was sure she'd won. She was smiling, more with relief than joy, as she spoke to 2V.

"We should give the crew of the Genkaku a reward."

"Might be a good idea," 2V said, mostly ignoring her while he thought about the report that Rubbers had just given him.

—At this point, we've essentially won... But that means that this girl is in the way. I can't have her winning too many victories.

2V glanced at Eiko.

And then a voice came through the communicator, and Eiko answered it. It was a Teruya soldier.

"We're encountering human resistance, not demon beast, in front of the Genkaku. We cannot stop them."

"That student council president?! You still haven't dealt with her?" Eiko shouted.

"The resistance stronger than anticipated..."

"I'm not sending you any reinforcements. It would embarrass us. Did you contact me just to tell me that?" Eiko said angrily.

"No, the enemy is saying that you killed our master."

"What?" Eiko grimaced.

2V was surprised at this sudden turn of events.

—Oh, this is convenient. I guess her time is up...

But Eiko's response was unexpected.

"Kill her! Don't let her get near the reporters. And especially don't let her get near the Hattori. They've got cameramen with them the whole time!"

—Does the rest of the clan know, and are they swearing loyalty to her anyway?

2V wondered.

"I'm sending reinforcements," Eiko said. "Make sure you don't let her survive. If we can pull this off, our clan's glory is assured."

With that, Eiko closed the communication channel.

"They know, and they don't care? The Teruya soldiers."

"Mind control takes a long time, and you have to use drugs... But if you live with someone, it's still possible to do it, right?" Eiko grinned.

"Hmm. So you had this all planned out?"

"I wouldn't have been able to kill my dad otherwise."

2V looked at her with quiet, cold eyes.

—I guess she really is dangerous after all. I don't think I can manipulate her. But what to do with her, then?

He quickly began to formulate a plan.

○

"I'll blow you away!" Lily shouted as her fists flew out, catching several of the armored warriors at once.

They were all blown back, and collapsed in a circle around her. Beyond them were even more soldiers and armored warriors of the Teruya clan. They were too scared of the short girl to attack.

Beyond the Teruya soldiers were the army's soldiers. They'd seen that Lily wasn't a demon beast, and weren't sure if she was an enemy. And Lily was taking advantage of that.

Lily stepped forward, and the ring of armored warriors followed her. After she was done advancing, she quickly moved to the front end of the ring, and another battle began.

Lily's long arms dodged past the warrior's katanas, slamming her fists into their faces.

This had happened over and over, but the warriors' morale hadn't faded at all. They were wary of her, but showed no sign of

retreat.

—They've been brainwashed, huh? They've got so much energy.

Lily was becoming mentally exhausted.

Eiko Teruya killed her father, your clan leader!" she shouted for what felt like the hundredth time.

But the warriors' faces didn't move. Instead, when she shouted, they used the opening to attack her. As she knocked them down, she began to understand what was going on.

—It's difficult to completely brainwash someone with magic. You have to use drugs, like Fujiko Eto did. I guess it's a combination of drugs and daily training. So even if Eiko doesn't want me going to the media with this, in the end it probably doesn't matter. She has so many supporters that it will just get swept under the rug. There's only one fast way to end this, and that's to defeat Eiko Teruya.

Lily looked out at the area in front of the school. There was a good distance between her and Eiko's tent.

In front of her were a hundred armored warriors, and behind them were 500 perfectly rested Teruya soldiers. At this point, they were all focusing their attacks on Lily.

600 in all. And Lily was alone.

—I knew this was going to happen, but... Now that I'm actually doing it, this is bad news.

Lily wasn't the type of girl to pick fights she couldn't win out of a desire to prove herself. Usually when she did something crazy, it was because she acted out of instinct.

—Well, it doesn't matter. I'm the one who started this fight. I wonder if sending the trio to save Keena was the right decision. I can't let them do anything too risky. Now, then...

Lily charged into the warriors in front of her.

Punch, kick, punch, punch, punch.

She struck the foes to her front countless times, advancing like a drill going through a hard wall.

—If I keep attacking hard enough, I can go faster than my enemy can recover!

If she kept punching quick enough, the armored warrior's defenses and their healing magic couldn't save them. It was a simple plan, but in this case it was the right one.

Lily broke through the encircling warriors and into the Teruya's 500 ninja soldiers. The ninjas charged at her, some of them leaping into the air to attack from above, but Lily punched out randomly

without even aiming, creating a sphere of attacks around her. Anyone who touched the sphere was instantly struck and blown back.

—Keep striking! Knock away any attack! You'll be able to break through!

Lily urged herself on as she advanced.

The Teruya's ninjas didn't fight up close like the armored warriors did. They used magical fireballs, ranged weapons, and blinding smoke magic. But Lily knocked all that away with her mana-charged punches.

"Uwooaaah!"

She was like a ball charging through the crowd, knocking them away as she moved. It took an incredible amount of stamina to sustain her assault. The question was whether she would be able to break through, or run out of strength first.

—I'm close to my limit... But I can do this!

The pace of her attacks was dropping, and she had to aim carefully now, but she could see a gap in the Teruya ninjas ranks. 200 of them were already unconscious, and a hundred more unable to attack. And the other 200 were behind her.

—I've broken through!

The view in front of Lily opened up. There was just 100 meters to Eiko's tent, and nothing in between.

"Prepare to die, Eiko Teruya!"

But Eiko was unafraid.

"I said I was sending reinforcements!" Eiko gave the order, and soldiers appeared around Lily.

It was the five companies, 500 troops strong, who had remained in reserve instead of fighting the demon beasts.

"That's the student council president. She's a criminal, and she's spreading lies that I killed my father the High Priest in order to help the Demon King. Some of you may doubt this. So I won't order you to kill her. Capture her!"

The soldiers seemed convinced by Eiko's words. They attached bayonets to their rifles and pointed them at Lily.

From Lily's perspective, it was like a huge wall had appeared. The soldiers' ranks were deep, and the bayonets of the ones in the rear poked out past the ones in the front.

This wall of bayonets was advancing towards her.

—Tch... I'm almost out of strength, too. I thought I'd left enough

power in reserve to fight Eiko, but I guess I just ran out of steam...

Lily glanced to her left and right. There were identical walls on both sides.

Each wall was made out of a hundred or so soldiers. And behind them, the Teruya ninjas were recovering.

—I could fly, but the guns in the rear would just shoot me down. I don't want to use any more stamina, anyway.

Lily's only salvation was that the soldiers were advancing slowly. None of them were sure that she was actually evil, and they were trying to capture her, not kill her. But to Lily, it felt like she was being slowly strangled to death.

—Tch... I guess this is the end, huh?

Just when Lily was about to give up, she heard a scream from behind her.

"Aaaaaaah!"

—Hm?

Lily turned around and saw a ball of fur zooming towards her at ridiculous speed. It was like somebody had pitched a giant, furry a baseball at her. And the screaming was coming from the ball.

"What?!" Lily flinched back in surprise.

The soldiers surrounding her froze as well.

Thud.

The ball of fur landed next to her with a loud crash, sending dirt flying everywhere.

"Owww..." the ball of fur moaned. A moment later, limbs stretched out from the furball and it became a wolf slightly larger than a man. It shook itself to get the dirt off its coat.

"There was no reason for Arnul to throw me that damn hard..." the wolf said, and then it grinned at Lily.

"Kanna..." Lily's face broke into a grin.

The wolf was Kanna Kamiyama, the student council's treasurer. She had a special power that would let her transform into a wolf.

Lily looked in the direction that Kanna had come from and saw a massive suit of armor, three times the size of a man, standing next to the school building. The suit of armor must have been what had thrown her, because it was still in a pitching follow-through stance. It was the battle armor used by the secretary, Arnul.

"You guys..." Lily had to force herself to not cry. "I told you to save Keena Soga."

"Nah, Michie's on that. We knew exactly what you were

thinking. And we're not happy that you tried to leave us out of it." Kanna bared her teeth into a wolfy grin.

"...Are you stupid? How are you planning on getting out of this?"

"I never thought of that. The same way you never think of anything."

"I see." Lily shot a wolfy grin right back at her.

"I feel stupid for giving up hope. We're almost there. It's time to kick some ass. Right?"

"That's what I'm here for! Now this is getting fun." Kanna let out a howl.

—Another combatant has joined the fray, hm? At this point, perhaps having the student council president win is the smarter choice.

2V started to run some quick calculations.

—Eiko stated publicly that she didn't kill her father. She plans to wait for Boichiro to win the battle, and then alter the records. It's a good idea, but some of the soldiers probably don't believe her. I can use that to cause more chaos, if I want to...

2V focused his mind. He had dolls in many different units in the army — some were with the front-line troops fighting the demon beasts, some were with the squads on standby, and some were in the rear with the medics.

"Hey, did you hear? The enemy says the high priest's daughter killed him and tried to take his place."

"No, it was the Demon King that killed him, right?"

"But don't you agree there's something weird about the way Eiko Teruya is acting?"

"Maybe, but... Orders are orders."

2V's dolls were having conversations like that all over the army. Of course, the soldiers were loyal to their mission — even if they didn't trust their commander, they would still follow orders. But despite that, the rumors spread quickly, and became tinder that could later catch fire.

Lily and Kanna made a great team. Lily would charge in, and Kanna would follow after her. Given their appearances, the enemy thought it would be the other way around, and had no idea how to react to this.

"Take this! Special Move: Sphere Smash!"

Lily was having fun. Whether it was a good name for a technique or not, she'd gotten her fighting spirit back.

Countless fists formed a sphere around her body, blowing away her enemies. Kanna would leap around her to protect her blind spots, which meant that she didn't have punch into empty air like she had to do before. Now she could keep the battle going for longer, and her attacks were far more powerful.

"Anyway, these are just ordinary soldiers! They can't use magic!"

"If they get close, they'll get hurt!"

Kanna was running around at a speed human reflexes couldn't match. These were the same movements that had been too fast for Akuto, even if that was before he awakened. The soldiers kept their distance and fired their rifles, but by the time they aimed at one spot, Kanna was already gone. Their bullets went every which way, and they ended up hitting their comrades.

Eventually they got tired of trying to attack the wolf, and went for the human Lily instead, but Kanna would put herself between them as a shield and block the bullets with her body. Her coat was tough and flexible, and any bullets that hit it would simply bounce off.

"We're almost to Eiko Teruya!"

"That was easier than I thought!"

Lily and Kanna continued their ferocious advance.

"You're an embarrassment to the Koga clan! What's going on?" Eiko screamed into her communicator.

The command tent was on a hill some distance away from the schoolyard, but Lily was almost there. Eiko should've known that normal soldiers had no chance against magical experts.

"The giant armor has us pinned down. We're trying our best, but..."

Of course, Eiko could see what was going on. The giant armor that had flung the wolf creature across the yard had then moved towards her armored warriors next to the school building. Eiko knew how strong it was — a few ninjas wouldn't be enough to stop it.

"Send the Hattori to capture the student council president!" Eiko shouted.

2V saw his chance.

—I guess she's getting desperate. Yuko's unit is constantly being followed by the media. If they get close to the student council, viewers all over the country will hear about how she killed her father. When that happens, it will be difficult for her to put a stop to the rumors. If I want to, I can have Eiko Teruya removed from the game entirely...

Eiko had no idea what 2V was plotting.

"Find some reason to bring Yuko Hattori to the command tent," Eiko told the messenger. Then she ended the call and smiled. "Alright, Junko Hattori, time for you to do your job!"

○

"What...?" Junko had no idea what to say.

She couldn't believe the order she'd been given. She'd been told to kill the Student Council President.

"I've heard rumors that you killed your father. This isn't your way of trying to bury the truth, is it?"

On the surface, Junko was still calm, but her lips were shaking. She'd heard the rumors a moment ago.

"Do I seem like the kind of girl who'd do something like that? We're in the middle of an operation. Shut your mouth."

—You do! That's why I said it!

But Junko only thought those words, she didn't say them. Instead she answered in a trembling voice...

"Yes, it's not something I should be saying where others can hear me," Junko said. "But I can't do this without a reason. The Student Council President isn't part of the Demon King's armies."

"I'm not asking for your opinion on this. Before I called you, I ordered Yuko the idol sent to my tent. I told the media, too. They're happy that they'll get a safe place to interview her."

"Wh-What are you trying to say?"

Junko hurriedly looked around her. Yuko was gone, and so were the reporter and cameraman.

"I don't know what's got the Student Council President so riled up, but wouldn't it be beautiful if the idol got hurt trying to protect her commander on the battlefield?"

"Eiko Teruya!" Junko screamed.

—Is she willing to go that far?!

At this point, it was clear that she'd killed her father to become high priest. From the way she was acting and the way the battle

was going, there was no doubt about it. That would explain Akuto's anger, too.

—So the honor of the high priest means nothing now? No, somebody must be using the system for evil ends. I'd heard bad rumors about the head of the Teruya clan, but I didn't think they'd go this far...! This whole war was just to advance Eiko's position! No, all the battles that have happened so far happened because of the Teruyas! I can't even imagine how many people died... I heard the dark rumors, too. I tried to convince myself that this was necessary to keep order. But...

"Everyone! Your new orders are to stop anyone heading for the command tent!"

But now she had no choice but to stop Lily.

—I'm an idiot. I'm working to uphold a system where the high priest rules...

Junko gave her orders to the Hattori ninjas. The ninjas gave up on fighting the demon beasts and started to move, with Junko in the lead.

—So Akuto Sai was right all along? It was his fault that all this happened. But it could also be said that he's brought the dark secrets of the Teruya to light. Did he know about them, and that's why he's so mad?

She wanted to talk to him... But...

When she'd seen the Genkaku crash into Akuto and Peterhausen and ram them into the school building, she'd been overcome by despair. But it was Yuko who'd saved her. If the demon beast blood was still pulsing within Yuko, it meant that Akuto was still alive.

—If you're alive, then prove you're the Demon King! Prove that you're unstoppable, that you can overturn this rotten system in a single strike!

"What am I supposed to be doing here?"

Yuko was surprised that she'd been summoned to the command tent. She could understand that she was supposed to be kept away from the demon beasts, but she didn't understand why there was nothing for her to do but give interviews.

"Do you think that peace has returned now that the Demon King is gone?"

The reporter, clearly relieved to be back in the safe area, was pointing the microphone at her. It seemed like they hadn't noticed Lily's approach. Maybe they didn't think that Lily was important

enough to matter, or maybe they just didn't understand what was going on.

"The battle's still going on. We can't let our guard down."

But Yuko understood the flow of the battle. Something didn't make sense. Even this place didn't feel safe to her at all. More than anything, there was one thing that she knew and nobody else did.

"And what's more, the Demon King is still alive."

The people around her began to murmur.

"Wh-What do you mean?" the reporter asked.

"It's just intuition, but I can tell. Oh...!"

Suddenly she stopped talking and looked out in the distance. The Hattori forces had started to face off against Lily.

"My sister..." Yuko pointed towards the direction of the battle.

Eiko saw that things were coming to a head, and had the cameraman and reporter leave.

"I'm sorry. This place might be dangerous soon. Can you leave us for a while?"

Eiko chased the media away, and then stood behind Yuko as she watched Lily and Junko with glee.

Lily had stopped when she'd seen this new, powerful foe appear. She was starting to run out of strength. Normal soldiers, she could handle, but she didn't have the strength to face the Hattori ninjas. She came to a halt when she blocked one of the ninja's attacks, and then she saw Junko taking command.

"You're one of our students," Lily said, motioning for the enraged Kanna to stay put. "Why are you stopping me? You don't believe a word Eiko Teruya says, do you?"

Junko grimaced as she turned towards the tent. She said nothing, but Lily understood what she meant.

"Oh, she took a hostage, huh? But even without that, your family wouldn't let you disobey the Teruya, would they?"

When she heard the sarcasm in Lily's voice, Junko finally let her emotions show.

"If you know, then why are you even asking?!"

"Hmph. That's a good question. Because I want to bully you." Lily grinned.

"I may not hurt you, but my clan's ninjas are very short-tempered. I can't guarantee you'll survive!"

As if Junko's words were a signal, the Hattori ninjas all rushed at Lily at once.

“Iga Ninja Technique: Five Pointed Magic Circle!”

The technique hadn’t worked on Akuto, but when the five ninjas leapt at the exhausted Lily, she was only able to down two before the other three got close. Kanna ran between them and Lily, but she was only able to block the next two. The last ninja got behind her and attacked with his katana.

“Gaah!” Lily dropped to her knees. She swung her fist backwards as she fell, but the ninja was already out of reach. Then she spat, “You used the dull edge of the blade... I guess you must not think I’m much of a threat. I don’t like it... when people show me pity.”

“Stop this, President. We might still be able to work this out.”

Junko had calmed down a little, it seemed, because she was now trying to reason with Lily. But of course, Lily wasn’t interested.

“Fool. How can you be so naive? If you think you’re right about something, then just do it. Forget about your family. Forget about other people. If somebody is aiding something that’s wrong, whether they’re a good person, a weak person, or a friend of yours, they still deserve to die.” Lily stood up.

“Tch...” Junko grimaced. If she gave the order, the Hattori ninjas would attack without hesitation.

“Do it...”

Eiko smiled as she put her hand into her jacket. Yuko was sitting right in front of her — all she had to do was draw the blade in her jacket and strike, and she could cut off Yuko’s head. Eiko knew that Junko was constantly watching her.

2V observed the scene calmly.

—I suppose it’s time.

He quietly focused his mind, his expression remaining unchanged. His dolls began to move.

Junko closed her eyes and brought down her hand to give the order.

The Hattori ninjas leapt.

“Iga Ninja Technique: Five Pointed Magic Circle!”

But their technique was never finished.

“Gwah!”

“Uwah!”

The ninjas screamed and fell.

“What happened?” Junko looked around her.

Shockingly enough, the ninjas had been felled by ordinary

soldiers.

"...What's going on?" Junko didn't understand what had just happened.

Five soldiers with rifles were standing in front of Lily and Kanna. There was smoke rising from the barrels of their guns. They were the ones who had shot the ninjas down as they attacked.

But even if they'd caught the ninjas off guard, it was almost impossible for normal soldiers without magic to hit a moving ninja.

Lily knew that as well.

"Who are you people...?" She looked suspiciously at the soldiers who'd protected her.

"People who believe that Eiko Teruya killed her father," one of the soldiers responded.

Then the soldiers started to move. Three advanced quickly, while the remaining two provided cover fire. Amazingly, their teamwork and speed were superior to the ninjas'.

"Impossible!" Junko was baffled at what was unfolding before her very eyes. The five soldiers began to take down one ninja after another.

"I can't say I like this at all..."

Lily began to walk towards Junko. The ninjas were too busy dealing with the soldiers, so the only thing standing between Lily and Eiko's tent was Junko.

"...What the heck is going on here?!" Junko asked in confusion.

"One of the members of C-MID8 is supposed to be able to control dolls. He's probably in the command tent. Now, I feel bad for your sister, and I'll save her if I can, but don't hate me if I fail." Lily took another silent step towards Junko.

"Tch..." Junko finally understood what was going on. Eiko was at fault for everything. But there was nothing she could do.

—I have to fight!

She steadied herself for battle.

"Iga Ninja Technique: Distorted Moonshadow!"

Junko created a clone of herself, and the two Junkos attacked Lily at once.

"Hmph. I've got two arms, you know." Lily laughed, and she punched each clone with a different arm.

—N-No! I can't lose this easily!

Junko kept blocking the punches, but as the blows rattled her brain she realized that it was losing its ability to give orders to her

body.

—She's far too strong...

Junko and the clone both collapsed, and the clone disappeared.

The Student Council President had defeated her easily once before. But this time, she felt far more powerless than she had before. This time, it was different. If she wasn't strong, she couldn't protect anything.

—D-Damn it...

She moved her unsteady hand down towards the Sohaya no Tsurugi. But she couldn't draw it.

—My feelings are strong... Is that not good enough?

Junko wept tears of frustration.

"Eiko Teruya!" Lily leapt at Eiko.

"Y-You fool! Don't you care what happens to her...?!" Eiko put an arm around Yuko's neck and drew her dagger, but Lily didn't even flinch.

"I don't care! I can have vengeance quickly by killing you!"

"Aaah!"

Eiko swung her dagger.

"Kyaaah!" Yuko screamed.

But—

"What?!"

"Uwwooah!"

"Kyaaah!"

Lily, Eiko, and Yuko all screamed at once.

A gust of wind had blown between them.

○

Lily's fist had landed on his back.

Eiko's dagger was stopped by his left hand.

And in his right arm, he was holding Yuko.

"I'm keeping my promise," Brave whispered to Yuko.



“Brave!” Yuko shouted with joy.

“I’m going to go away for a little, but it’ll be okay, alright?” Brave said as he left the tent and flew up into the sky.

It all happened too fast for Lily, Eiko, or 2V to react.

Boichiro was in the sky above them, standing on top of his giant sword, which seemed to have flying powers. Hiroshi stood next to him, still holding Yuko. Boichiro was holding a girl as well — Keena.

“Is that who you wanted to save?” Boichiro asked. Hiroshi nodded.

“That’s why I wanted the suit back. That’s why I’m helping you,” Hiroshi replied.

“You don’t need to truly sympathize with me. But I will ask for your cooperation for a while,” Boichiro said, and the two of them left the battlefield.

○

“I don’t know what just happened, but I’m glad it did!” Lily smiled cruelly.

Eiko realized there was nothing left to protect her, and her face twisted in fear. She’d seen how quickly Junko had gone down, and she and Junko were at about the same level of strength. She wasn’t stupid enough that she failed to recognize Lily’s power.

“2V!” Eiko turned towards 2V for help. But he was simply sitting in his chair and smiling.

“Prepare to die!” Lily howled.

Eiko went down in a hail of punches.

“Dorryaaaah!”

Lily kept punching even after she fell. Even after Eiko stopped moving on the floor, Lily kept punching.

“Dorryaaaaaaah!”

Lily could hear snapping sounds as she kept punching.

“P-President! Stop!” Kanna said when she finally caught up.

“Hmm?” Lily realized what was wrong and stopped.

“Crap...!”

Lily had been punching a wooden log that was wearing Eiko’s jacket.

“An escape technique! Running away is the one thing she’s good at...!” Lily hissed as she grit her teeth.

2V laughed. Lily turned to glare at him. He muttered a soft apology and then pointed to the horizon. They could see her running towards the Teruya army.

“I came all this way and I have to start over?!” Lily howled.

“Yes, it’s a shame. Good work, though,” 2V said.

Lily glared at him again, but he just shrugged.

“You’ve succeeded in destroying her ambitions of leadership. You seem to have evidence she killed her father, too. So there’s no need to be so upset.”

“Are you the one they call 2V?”

“Don’t look so angry. I’m not here to fight. For now, why don’t we cooperate? C-MID8 wants the same thing you do.” 2V’s voice remained cheerful as he continued, “We want the Demon King defeated, and the Teruyas removed from power. And it looks like we’re about to get both of these things. You give me the information I need, and I’ll make sure it’s put to the best use it can be. That will solve everything.”

“I don’t like you. I don’t like you at all,” Lily said. Her voice was low.

She understood what he was saying. If she did what 2V wanted, whether the Demon King was alive or dead, Eiko was finished. If Eiko was stripped of command, authority would go to the next person down the chain, presumably the commander of the Genkaku. That would be all it took to calm things down.

But...

“I’m not here to fight for peace, or to put an end to all this,” Lily said firmly. “I’ve been looking into this for a long time. I’ve been trying to find out if C-MID8 is trying to overthrow the empire. If maybe they’ve even turned on their leader, and are trying to use his mysterious ambitions for their own ends.”

2V laughed as if he found that funny.

“Hahaha! You found all that out, huh? I’m impressed! Even we were shocked when we heard what Boichiro was after. But then we started to think there might be some things even he hadn’t noticed. And we couldn’t believe what wonderful things we found! He was lying to us about who he is and what he wants. So there’s no reason for us to help him, unless it benefits us!”

“Then tell me what it is that you want. What’s more important

in this country than the battle between the gods and the Demon King?"

"I told you, relax. If you help us, I'll tell you our secret."

"Shut up. I'm a little too stubborn for that."

"Oh dear. I see you're a tough, tiny little girl."

"Tiny... You're dead, you know that?" Lily's voice dropped low as 2V laughed.

She put her hand up to the hat she was wearing, and then pulled it to the side to turn the brim around. The smiley face on the hat turned to an angry face. It was a sign she made when her anger was beyond her control.

"There's nothing for you to gain by fighting me!" 2V complained.

The dolls who had been fighting the Hattori clan instantly returned, and charged at Lily.

"President!" Kanna screamed in warning.

Lily had very little strength left. She knew it, too.

"Shut up! I need to use my best technique, or I just won't feel right!"

Lily stretched out her arms, and flailed them around her body. But they weren't hitting anything. The stretched out arms wrapped around and around her body tightly. She was building up power.

2V's dolls all attacked her at once, but Lily jumped upwards, her arms still wrapped around her body, to dodge. And then she released the power she'd built up towards 2V, who was still sitting in his chair.

"Go! My ultimate big punch! I call it... THE BIG PUNCH!"

Lily's body spun and her right fist struck out with incredible speed. The fist broke the sound barrier, and a sonic boom shook the tent.

One of 2V's dolls ran between him and her fist.

"Second stage... accelerator!"

Lily unwrapped the other arm from her body and used it to spin faster. As it advanced, the punching fist left a ring of pale steam behind it. The air in front of the fist was being compressed so hard that the moisture within it solidified as it passed.

2V's dolls felt no pain, so they could be shields in a way that humans couldn't. But Lily's fist went right through the doll's stomach.

"What?!" Even 2V was shocked at this.

He moved more dolls in front of himself, but Lily's fist ripped through them all.

"Uwah!" 2V's eyes opened wide. Lily's fist had smashed into his stomach. For a moment he froze, before collapsing into his chair.

"Hmph." Lily brought her arms back to normal size as she landed. A moment later, all of 2V's dolls crumbled to the ground.

"I don't think I can use that again for a while... I was planning on saving that for the Demon King, too," Lily said as she walked up to the defeated 2V, but then her expression clouded. "What...?!"

Lily grabbed 2V by the hair and lifted him up, then slammed him back into the ground.

"This one's a doll too!"

"R-Really?!" Kanna ran over to see.

The hole Lily had torn open in 2V's abdomen was ringed with mechanical parts.

"Hahahaha..." 2V — no, the doll she'd thought was 2V — began to laugh. There was no expression on its face. It was eerie, like a laughing corpse.



“Where are you controlling this thing from?!” Lily yelled.

2V replied mockingly, “It’s a secret, of course! But once this doll shuts down, the others will shut down as well. I put a booster inside it, you see. Hahaha... If our luck’s bad, maybe we’ll run into each other again someday. But even if we do, you won’t recognize me. As you can see, I have no face. Hahaha, hahahahahaha...”

With one last eerie laugh, 2V’s doll shut down.

“Shit!” Lily stomped on the doll’s face. “He made a fool of me! That’s the one thing I hate more than anything!”

“W-We’ve got more important things to worry about right now...” Kanna interrupted, trying to snap Lily out of it. “You’re running out of energy, and Eiko Teruya is running away. Even if she’s finished as a commander, we have to stop her.”

“Damn it... But I’m too tired to move...” Lily turned her hat back around and slumped up against Kanna’s furry back.

“Jeez... Why is it you never think things through?” Kanna asked.

“Quiet. I’ll get some rest, and then we can go at it again. You got any food?”

“A certain somebody ate the snacks I keep hidden in the Student Council Room.”

“Oh, the principal never bought a new bag of chips to replace ’em?”

“It was the principal who ate them? That old man... Wait, President! Something’s happening at the school!” Kanna shouted.

Lily turned to look, and saw that the soldiers near the remains of the Genkaku were starting to shout.

Meanwhile, Rubbers was blocking the corridor, and Fujiko and Michie were in trouble.

“Ya know... I’m starting to think we can’t beat this guy,” Michie said gloomily.

In the underground crypt, Michie had once beaten most of the school’s students so badly they had to go to the hospital. If she didn’t think they could win, Fujiko was worried.

“I-If you’re so wimpy, why did you come here alone?!” she yelled.

“In a tight corridor my mechanical bats should be invincible...! At least... that’s what I thought...”

There were so many attacks that Rubbers, with his artificial body, was immune to. Even now he was slowly advancing on them, seemingly hoping they would attack him. It was unclear if he was the type who only attacked when someone attacked him first, or if he enjoyed being attacked. With no way to read his expression it was impossible to tell.

Fujiko and Michie began to slowly step back.

"L-Listen, you got any special magic spells or something?" Michie asked.

"If I did, I would have used it already! Outside of my drugs I'm no more powerful than a normal student!"

"Ahh... I'm not sure that's something to be proud of," Michie sighed.

Rubbers seemed to finally run out of patience. He began to increase his speed, bounding along the floor.

"Aah!"

"Hyah!"

He flew by the Cerberus that Fujiko was riding at incredible speed. Without the beast's incredible reflexes, his attack would've been impossible to dodge.

"Yeah... we're screwed," Michie said.

"No... maybe not." Fujiko suddenly looked like inspiration had struck her.

"Do you have a plan?"

"If I can just get to my lab..."

"If that's what you need, I'll make it happen," Michie said as she launched her bats and wind at Rubbers.

Suddenly Rubber's body changed in a surprising way. He stretched his body out as thin as he could, and then clung flat against the floor.

"Aaah! That's so creepy!"

"Stop talking and get on! We're getting out of here!" Fujiko had the beast crouch so that Michie could get on, and then spurred it onwards.

Rubbers followed them, still flat against the floor. He looked like liquid running down a tilted surface. He wasn't going that fast, but once Michie was too far away to hit him with her wind, he transformed into a ball and began to bounce after them.

"He's going to catch up with us! I can't take this anymore!"

"You never stop complaining, do you... Just use your magic to

drive him off when he gets too close!”

“Th-That’s right! Man, you’re so smart!”

“I’m starting to think you’re making fun of me... Anyway, we’re almost there! Just hang in there!”

“Sure thing!” Michie focused all her energies, and was able to drive back Rubbers one last time. The Cerberus slid into Fujiko’s lab.

“Just keep him busy a little longer!” Fujiko leapt off the beast and into the lab, leaving Michie panicked.

“Aah... aah... Wait... j-just me?!”

“Just hold him off for a little while and I’ll be right back!”

“Aaah! Please don’t just run and leave me here!”

Rubbers leapt at Michie while she spoke. She tried to block him with a flock of bats, but Rubbers just shrugged off her attack. The bats dug into his stretched-out body, stretching it out even further backwards as they dived into him. But they couldn’t penetrate his tough skin.

“Aah! This isn’t going to work!”

Michie realized she was too exhausted to fight. She tried to summon more wind, but it wasn’t enough to stop Rubbers.

Rubbers’ hand stretched out.

“Aaah!” Michie covered her face with her hands.

But his hand never reached her.

“Well, I certainly handled that quickly,” Fujiko said with a grin.

She was carrying what looked like a silver canister in both hands. White smoke was pouring out of the opening at the top.

Michie turned to look at Rubbers. The same white smoke from the canister was rising from his hand — it had frozen solid.

“What did you do?”

“Liquid nitrogen! He can use magic to stop the temperature drop, but once he’s covered in it, he can’t block its effects with mana!”

Fujiko loosened the spout, and the liquid shot out at Rubbers. He tried to block it with a mana shield, but Fujiko destroyed the shield with a spell of her own.

“I guessed that since you never need to use mana shields to protect yourself, you wouldn’t be any good at it. And I guessed right!”

The liquid nitrogen landed on Rubbers’ body, and he screamed. Half of his body turned a frozen white, and lost its flexibility.

“Now! Attack!”

“Right on!” Michie fired her mechanical bats. A colony burst forth from her cape, and the sharp blades on their wings attacked Rubbers. Until now, his tough flexible body had been able to shrug off the damage, but now they left obvious wounds on him.

“This is going to work!”

Michie concentrated their attacks on the frozen half of his body. There was a series of cracking noises as his body began to be chipped away, little by little.

Rubbers let out a bizarre howl. He stretched out the remaining half of his body, seemingly using the last of his strength. It was obvious that this would be his last attack.

“If that’s all you’ve got...!”

Fujiko leapt back and dodged, but Rubbers wasn’t aiming for her. Rubbers stretched out his hands towards Cerberus and into the pouch tied around his neck.

“Huh?”

Fujiko didn’t know what he was doing. But when Rubbers’ arm came back and she saw what was in his hand, she cried out in surprise and fear.

“No!”

Rubbers had grabbed the pot that held the part of Akuto’s body she’d been cultivating. It was what gave her control over the demon beasts.

Fujiko opened the valve on the liquid nitrogen again, but shockingly, Rubbers abandoned the part of his body that had frozen. He stretched out an arm and snapped off the frozen part. Even with half his body gone, he was still able to bounce out of the corridor carrying the pot, and flee.

Fujiko didn’t have the energy left to chase him, and it was clear the even if she tried, she would fail.

“What was in that pot?” Michie asked, but Fujiko just shook her head. There was no need to tell her.

But Fujiko knew exactly what him taking it meant. At this point, it didn’t matter if she lost control of the demon beasts. But with that pot, the enemy would be able to research Akuto’s unique mana wave pattern. She didn’t know what they could do with it, but it might turn out to be something awful.

“A-Anyway... We’ve driven off the enemy. Let’s go see what else is happening.”

Fujiko tried her best to pretend she was staying calm.

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Fujiko and Michie went to the place where the carrier Genkaku had collided with the school, and were astonished to see the principal digging Akuto out from the rubble. Fujiko immediately let out of a cry of joy.

“Oh, you’re safe, Akuto!” She ran over and helped Akuto up.

“Yeah... This was pretty rough.”

“If the dragon hadn’t saved you, you might not have survived. And if I hadn’t used my own skills on the carrier, neither you nor he would’ve survived,” the headmaster said as the rubble around them began to collapse.

Peterhausen appeared, with a large gash on his head. No blood was coming from the gash, but that was only because of how Peterhausen’s body was built. It was clearly a bad wound.

“You okay?” Akuto asked. Peterhausen shook his head.

“I’m not the type who pretends to be okay when he isn’t. I’ll tell you the truth, because it will likely have an effect on our future battles. I’ve lost a portion of several of my powers. Even I can tell that something is wrong. It won’t affect me normally, but if I try to use magical support, there’s no telling what will happen.”

“If that happens, maybe you weren’t lying when you said you’d give your life for me,” Akuto said sadly. And then he turned to Fujiko, who was now clinging to him.

“What’s happening?”

“I-I’m sorry. The demon beasts have been defeated. The soldiers are cleaning them up. And Boichiro Yamato has taken Keena Soga somewhere...”

“I see... Then we’ll have to follow him.” Akuto stood up. His face grimaced with pain.

“Y-You mustn’t! You have to fall back and regroup! Even if we can’t use the Academy as our base, with the black mages’ support we can easily build a hideout! If you die, everything is over!”

Fujiko clung to Akuto. He wrapped his arms around her head and whispered into her ear, “That’s not right. What I’m trying to do is put an end to everything.”

“What...?” Fujiko froze. “Does that mean you’re going to die, Akuto?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far. But I suppose you can say I will, in the sense that I’ll be dead. I don’t mean I’ll lose my life. If I can prove that I can kill a god, I might be able to rid this world of some tiny part of this evil story. If that happens, I’ll cease being the Demon King. I don’t know what happens then, though,” Akuto said coldly, but Fujiko violently shook her head.

“No! You’re my hope! You’re the one who saved me, and gave me a path to follow!”

“But that means you want to be a part of my story as the Demon King. That means elevating strong men and superior systems to the status of godhood, and creating stories about them that you rely on. That’s what allows people to use those stories to hurt people.”

“But there are also people who are saved that way!”

“And that’s why it needs to end. Of course, I’m going to save as many people as I can, while still remaining me. Even you, if you’ll stay with me, I’ll do my best to live up to your hopes.”

“Akuto...” Fujiko looked up at him with dewy eyes.

Akuto glanced over at Peterhausen.

“It’s time to go,” he said.

“Wait!” Fujiko yelled, “I’m going with you!”

But Akuto shook his head.

“I can’t let you. I don’t know what’s going to happen now.”

“But...” Fujiko let out a howl, as if all the feeling she’d been holding back were exploding. “Why Keena?! Why are you going to be with her?”

“Because she’s the one who will rid me of my story.”

Fujiko collapsed to the ground when she heard his answer.

“So, that’s what the difference between us was... But when you come back, I’m sure I’ll also...” She trailed off.

The principal called out to Akuto as he walked off.

“Well, good luck. Try out what I taught you, too.”

“Of course. I’m going to try one thing right now.”

Akuto jumped over the rubble that was formerly the school’s wall, his hair blowing in the wind from outside.

The soldiers outside the school screamed.

“It’s the Demon King!”

“He’s alive!”

“Forget the demon beasts! Attack him!”

A hail of gunfire rained down on Akuto.

“How many are there...? The same as before. I hope I can scare them into running...”

Akuto knocked the bullets away with a wave as he slid down the mountain of rubble.

Even if you discounted the Hattori ninjas and the ones who’d been knocked out by the falling carrier, there were still over a thousand soldiers on the school grounds. Akuto exposed himself before the huge, gathering army. He could feel their anger, hatred, and fear coming at him in waves.

“Now... it’s time to end this whole rotten thing!”

Akuto leapt to the side and put his hand on the spherical prow of the carrier that had rammed him.

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“He’s... alive.” Junko raised her head.

The Hattori ninjas had been completely defeated. Including the ones who were helping Junko up, there were less than a hundred who could still fight. But no matter what happened, they would never forget their hatred for Akuto.

“Mistress! We can barely stand, and the Teruyas have betrayed us. But if the Demon King is alive, he is our priority!”

The Hattori ninjas regrouped and began to run towards the school building where Akuto was.

“W-Wait!” Junko followed them.

—You’re alive... You’re alive! But... but now I know that you’re not my enemy!

Junko was looking at Eiko, who had given up on taking command of the army and had surrounded herself with her own forces. Eiko seemed to plan on using the Demon King’s appearance as a way to cover up her own murder of her father. Abandoning the command post would normally have meant prosecution for dereliction of duty. But with the only enemy left being the Demon King, it looked, from a distance, like she was taking command in the field.

But the place where Eiko’s forces were standing was a point far away from where Akuto had appeared. The Hattoris were even farther away, but they at least were heading towards the battle. Part of the reason she was so far away was due to the battle with Lily, but still, it was clear to Junko that Eiko intended to sit this

battle out and let others fight it.

—You coward!

Junko grit her teeth hard.

But when the Hattoris approached Eiko, she laughed and mocked them.

“Useless idiots! Go get the Demon King already!”

—Tch...!

Junko put her hand to her small sword, but one of the ninjas stopped her.

“Control yourself, mistress. Even if she really did kill her father, if we kill her it will simply look like we assassinated her to gain power!”

“Then you want me to obey her...?” Junko’s whole body was wracked with frustration.

“Ahahaha! Hilarious, isn’t it?” Eiko saw her and laughed.

But then a black shadow suddenly fell on them both, and Eiko turned around.

“Wh-What?!” Eiko gasped.

The carrier Genkaku was sticking up straight in the air.

“I see... So this is the Hua Jin the old man taught me.”

Akuto was impressed. He was holding the Genkaku’s prow with both hands. The 350 meter long carrier was far too big for him to carry, but he was holding it easily. Of course, he was using mana to support it, but it was still his own power.

“Hua Jin... Quite impressive,” Akuto said.

When he heard this, Peterhausen shrugged his shoulders (despite being a dragon.)

“I’m not an expert, but I don’t think that’s how Hua Jin usually works.”

“The principal said you just have to use every muscle in your body.

It’s working, so who cares?” Akuto slowly tilted the Genkaku to the side, and with a quick shout, swung it like a bat.

It was like a collapsing building falling to the ground. There was a low rumbling as the carrier’s hull swept along, just above the earth.

All the soldiers could do was drop to the ground and pray. Anyone who didn’t believe in the story of the gods had nothing left but despair. Those who didn’t get to the ground in time were smashed by the carrier’s hull, and even those that managed to avoid

that were caught in the swirling air currents behind it, flung high into the sky and slammed into the ground. A single sweep of the carrier had brought down more than a thousand troops.

The carrier, not strong enough to take the force of the swing, split in half. The back half of it landed in the schoolyard, sending pieces scattering everywhere. There was a rumble like an earthquake and a cloud of dust like an explosion went up around the impact point.

"That should take care of most of it, I guess," Akuto said as he tossed the other half of the carrier aside.

There was another rumbling and cloud of dust, but there was nobody left to be scared or to run. All anyone could do was look up at Akuto in awe. In the face of overwhelming, impossible power, there was nothing for anyone to say.

—Oh, this is it...! This overwhelming... This overwhelming strength that can overturn everything!

Junko stood in the schoolyard, the wind howling around her, and shivered like a wind was blowing through her heart as well.

She knew the man who had used that power well. A dense, inconsiderate, but loyal man. Just like she'd hoped, a single strike from him had blown everything away.

—I wasn't wrong from the start. I knew all this from the moment we met!

Junko started to walk forward.

Only the Hattori and Teruya forces, who had been out of the range of the carrier, were unharmed. Of course, Eiko screamed at Junko.

"Stop the Demon King! That's an order!"

Junko smirked.

"You think you can tell me what to do without a hostage?"

For a moment, Eiko didn't seem to know what to do, but she quickly shook her head and pointed to one of the Hattori soldiers.

"Don't even try it! You there! Your mistress is ready to ruin your clan! If she attacks me here, your clan is finished!"

The ninja she threatened put a hand on Junko's shoulder.

"Mistress, I understand you're upset, but our enemy is the wicked Demon King. For now, we should..."

Junko brushed him off and put her hand on the Sohaya no Tsurugi.

Clink.

There was a small sound of metal hitting metal.

—The gods only act when it suits their purposes.

Junko remembered what her grandmother had said.

Power filled her body — but it wasn't rage that gave her this power.

"Hahahaha!" Junko laughed with glee.

"M-Mistress..." the ninja said, worried. Junko turned around with a brilliant smile.

"I am now," she said, "going to betray you!"

Junko unsheathed the Sohaya no Tsurugi. The blade gave off a strange, rainbow-colored light.

"Justice and the clan's honor didn't save us! I'm going to live for the man I love! This betrayal is love!"

The ninjas began to murmur amongst themselves, unsure of what to say. The old Junko would've hesitated, but now she felt filled with power and self-confidence. When they saw this, the ninjas rushed to her.

"This is not a betrayal! Do as you think best, mistress!"

Junko nodded, deeply moved.

"Of course!" And then she ran at Eiko, the rainbow blade raised high.

"Wha... Are you helping the Demon King?" Eiko quickly jumped backwards.

"That's right! But when I decided to kill you, the Sohaya no Tsurugi left its sheath! You were not chosen by the gods!"

"B-But the gods would never help someone who sided with the Demon King!"

"The gods exist to be used by humanity! And now, I have the power to kill you! What I do with that power afterward is up to me!"

"You're crazy! But... it doesn't matter! You're alone, and I have three hundred soldiers who will only listen to me!" Eiko yelled, and rows of armored warriors formed around her. There were still many who were unharmed, or who had been healed.

"Three hundred? Good, I won't need to count them!" Junko drew a magical symbol with her hand in front of her chest. "Ninja Technique: Crazed Moonshadow!"

It was Junko's clone technique. As she ran, there were suddenly two of her. And then, each of the clones split into two more.

"What... Is that even possible?!" Eiko screamed.

The number of Junkos continued to increase exponentially. It only took a few more clones cloning themselves before the army was surrounded by an impossible number of Junkos.

"There's... three hundred!"

Three hundred Junkos swarmed the Teruya army.

"Impossible...!" Eiko flinched as she felt a blast of wind run by her.

It was a single strike. The three hundred Junkos had taken down 300 soldiers with a single strike.

"That didn't even take a single second!"

"Of course not. Nobody needed a second swing."

The three hundred Junkos all laughed at once as they surrounded her. Eiko looked around frantically as if she was searching for something, but none of her soldiers were moving.

"W-Wait... We're old friends!"

"That's right! And that's why there are some things I can't forgive...!"

Three hundred Junkos swarmed one Eiko.

This time, there was nowhere to run. She was smothered by a swarm of Junkos, before being knocked up in the air. One of them had knocked her upwards with the dull edge of their katana to make it easier to hit her.

"Uwooaaah!"

One of the Junkos leapt at her. She was dealt another blow with the dull edge of the katana, and then another knocked her even higher.

Each time a Junko attacked, it disappeared. Eventually they were high up in the sky, and there was only one Junko left, looking at an unconscious Eiko. She had the Sohaya no Tsurugi ready. This time, she was using the sharp edge of the blade. She'd turned it around and was ready to strike.

"Your life is mine!" Junko brought the final blow down on Eiko's stomach.

Just when it looked like Eiko's body was about to be cleaved in two—

Clang!

There was a clanging sound from the Sohaya no Tsurugi. Someone's right arm had appeared out of thin air and blocked it.

"Please wait," an expressionless voice said as a hole began to open in the air. Korone poked her head out from it. She grabbed

Eiko with one arm while she held the Sohaya no Tsurugi.

“Korone…” Junko whispered. The fervor that had overtaken her was gone.

“You mustn’t kill her. She will live and atone for her sins. That’s how it has to be,” Korone said, and she took Eiko’s body back down below.

“Where have you been?” Junko asked as she landed on the ground beside her.

“I was shut down, but your grandmother saved me. I have a message from her.”

“What is it…?”

“‘I will take care of the rest. Follow whomever you like, and don’t worry about a thing.’” Korone gave an expressionless thumbs up.

She looked so ridiculous that Junko burst out laughing. And then she cried a little. This is what she should’ve done from the beginning.



She wiped away her tears and saw a black dragon flying through the sky above.

Junko and Korone watched it go.

“He never cares about me, does he?” Junko said.

“There aren’t many girls who’d want attention from a crazy man like him. That’s probably why.”

Junko laughed in response to Korone’s deadpan explanation.

“Heh. Alright, I suppose I’ll follow him, then.”

“You may leave things here to me, then. First, I’ll start by arresting her.” Korone put handcuffs on the unconscious Eiko.

“Thank you.”

With a nod of farewell, Junko started to walk towards what was left of the carrier to see if she could find a vehicle that still worked.

4 - A Perfect Ending?

Akuto knew exactly where Boichiro was going: the Suhara shrine. It was near the Koga village, so if you weren't flying, it was a long way away.

"Sorry I couldn't teleport us," Peterhausen said. He sounded apologetic, which was rare for him.

"I can't afford to push you too hard," Akuto said.

"Anyway, this might be the last chance we get. Can you tell me what you know?" Akuto said, a little sad.

"Yes, I suppose it's time. The being known as the Demon King is human, but not human. It's created by altering the mana within the body."

"I see... So do I have parents, then?"

"You have parents who gave birth to you. You may rejoice in that. Of course, they were forced to abandon you shortly after, for which you have my sympathies."

"Well, thanks. In other words, someone... The group known as black mages made me, and you?"

"That's right... in a sense. And wrong in a sense, as well. The reason the gods gained minds of their own is still not well understood. But it's possible to make guesses. In a sufficiently complex network of connections, the connections themselves can form a mind. Life born in that fashion — that is, a god — has no self, and thus no lifespan. This means it's constantly seeking to die. Humanity has never noticed this, and so many, many years ago, a certain man created the system known as the Demon King. The Demon King is capable of killing the gods and sending them to heaven."

"Heaven?" Akuto wasn't certain how to interpret that.

"At least, that is the language you would use. They will be given 'selves' and their minds will vanish from this world. It's a complicated concept. But if I were to tell you that even computers can have spirits, it would make things easier to understand, given the story of your world. It is the Law of Identity that gives them this

‘self.’ She is the counterpart to the Demon King.”

“You mean Keena?”

“Correct. But both the Law of Identity and the Demon King are born again and again. If things don’t seem to be going well, they are killed, and the gods wait another century or so. They’ve done this many times.”

“Humans are selfish, but so are the gods, huh?”

“Don’t be so harsh on them. As for me, I was created to maintain the system after the death of the gods. I have a self, a mind, of my own. The Liradan girl must have told you, right? A self is something that gradually settles in after one is given a body and a position. If gods with ‘selves’ ruled, the world would be filled with war like it used to be. But it also would be much more human. That is what the one who created me wanted.”

Peterhausen seemed to be remembering the past as he spoke.

“Is that why you like fighting?”

“That’s how a valiant king should be. You can kill the gods and become a king. That path is still open to you.”

“Is that what you want?”

“If possible, yes. But, my master, you are free to do as you wish. I’ve had plenty of fun. This has been one of the greatest battles in history. Thanks to the wild card that was Boichiro, we didn’t quite get our full-scale war, but you were the first to win.”

“I see.” Akuto sighed sadly. And then he continued, “I’m going to apologize before we begin. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but there’s no need to say that before we begin. I saw it coming.” Peterhausen gave his wings another big flap.

“Now, we’ve got two powerful foes waiting for us. We need to enjoy this!”

○

He was waiting alone in an empty sky.

Brave had crossed his arms, and was waiting, as bravely as his named implied, for the Demon King.

The two of them faced off some distance apart. It was Hiroshi who first opened his mouth, as if unable to take the silence.

“I’ll ask again. Why are you doing this?”

“I’m tired of answering. I’m putting an end to my story. If that

changes the world, then what's wrong with that?"

"And what happens to the people who don't want that change?" Hiroshi shouted angrily.

Akuto glanced down below. A huge forest spread out below them, but he could see someone in a clearing.

"If you're talking about that girl, I think I can do something to help her," Akuto said.

Hiroshi had asked Yuko to wait below. When he saw that Akuto had found her, he shook his head, displeased.

"You're always like this! You solve everything yourself, without ever talking to anybody!"

"I tell you, and you don't understand me. Enough. Get out of my way."

"You're so selfish!" Hiroshi suddenly accelerated.

Akuto tensed up, ready to fight, as Peterhausen asked him a question.

"How are you going to win this? He's using his anti-Demon King mana-canceler from the start. That's going to make this tough."

"I'm going to charge in. That's how we win. We end it in one strike." Akuto said, as if this was nothing special at all.

Peterhausen was surprised.

"Oh? I'm glad to hear that. Do you have plan?"

"Nope. My plan is to have no plan, I guess."

"...Whatever works. I'm counting on you." Peterhausen grinned. And then he accelerated as well.

Two strangely-colored comets clashed in the sky. There was a flash of light, for just a single instant.

"No...!" Hiroshi couldn't believe it. The high-frequency blade on his right arm was digging into Akuto's left arm. And the shielded high-temperature plasma ball in his left hand was pressed up against Akuto's right arm.

Akuto really had charged in without any plan at all. He'd just spread out his arms and let Hiroshi hit him.

"Gaaah!"

But Akuto screamed. The mana canceler had made his body no different than that of an ordinary human's. His left arm had been almost severed, and it hung limply as fresh blood spurt from the wound. The part of his right arm that had been touched by the plasma ball had instantly burned away. If he'd pressed his arm any

further forward, it would simply disappear.

It must have been indescribably painful. But still, Akuto moved forward, as if to embrace Hiroshi.

“Boss, stop!” Hiroshi let out a pained scream. He shut down the high-frequency blade and tried to get rid of the plasma. But the computer in his visor wouldn’t let him.

“A foreign object has entered the shield, and the plasma cannot be eliminated. Please dispel the shield.”

“No...” Hiroshi tried to drop the plasma ball. But before he could, Akuto pressed his arm into it.

“S-Stop it, boss!” Hiroshi panicked and released the ball.

A huge blast of wind and heat engulfed everything in the area, including Akuto, Peterhausen, and Hiroshi.

“Uwah!” Brave’s suit had deployed a shield around his body. Even without mana, Peterhausen was resistant to heat — but Akuto was just a normal man.

“Boss!” Hiroshi screamed.

But Akuto was right in front of Hiroshi’s eyes. He forced his body inside of Brave’s shield.

“Load on shield has increased. Low battery warning. Switching to life support mode. Please wait 30 seconds for charging to complete, and normal mode to become available,” the voice said.

Akuto grinned.

Hiroshi realized that he’d given up most of his arms, and the half of his body that had been melted by the plasma explosion, to make this happen.

“N-No!” Hiroshi dropped down into the forest, holding Akuto in his arms.

“I knew you weren’t the kind of person who could do something cruel. If I cruelly injured my own body, it would make you hesitate. And if I pushed you hard enough, it would drain your battery. That’s how your system works, and I knew that.”

Akuto’s body regenerated as they fell. He could absorb mana again.

“That’s terrible... that’s terrible, boss!” Hiroshi started to cry. “Why are you such an asshole... You really are the Demon King...”

“I know I’m an asshole. If I don’t come back, tell future generations what an asshole I was.”

“If you don’t come back?”

“Killing the gods means the end of me as well. That’s how it

works."

Akuto put his hand on Hiroshi's head. And then with a hard squeeze, he shattered the brave suit's helmet.

"Uwah...!" Hiroshi screamed. His face was exposed.

"I think I understand why you believe what you're doing is right," Akuto said.

The two of them collided into the ground.

"Ugh..." Hiroshi moaned. Without his suit to help him, he should have slammed into the ground full force, but Akuto had protected him.

Akuto landed firmly on the ground, standing upright, and holding Hiroshi in his arms, before setting him down.

Yuko ran up to them. When she saw Akuto, she let out a small scream.

"Don't worry. He's alive," Akuto said to her.

Hiroshi sat up and turned his face towards Yuko. It looked like he'd made a decision.

"Huh...?" Yuko looked surprised.

"Um... I didn't mean to hide it from you. It was just a coincidence. But I didn't really have any reason to tell you, either..." Hiroshi stammered.

Yuko started to laugh.

"You're so silly," she said. "No matter who you were on the inside, you were really cool."

Akuto watched them for a moment, and then began to walk off. But when she saw him move, Yuko's body went stiff.

"I know. When I'm here, it stops you from being normal." Akuto raised a hand to summon Peterhausen.

"Wait!" Hiroshi yelled.

When Akuto turned around, he spoke.

"Why don't you remove the Demon Beast's mana from her body?"

"Because that mana is being controlled by the god Suhara. If I try to alter it, it could hurt her."

"But then if the god dies...!"

"I… no, he, will take over for it." Akuto pointed to Peterhausen.

"Then that was your plan from the beginning...? But then, that means that the Demon King will rule the world. Wh-What will you do after that, boss?" Hiroshi quickly raised his voice, as a horrible thought struck him.

But Akuto didn't answer, not directly. Instead he just whispered.

"If that has to happen, then it has to happen. Someone has to do it."

○

Boichiro entered the temple of Suhara. The unconscious guardians lying on the path behind him testified to the fact that he hadn't been welcomed. In what was once the quiet place where Keizo Teruya did his work, Boichiro was now standing, carrying Keena.

"She is the Law of Identity."

"And you have come here with her to make the Contract of One. What is it you desire?"

He heard two voices. Two priestesses stepped out from behind the divine tree.

They were the Liradans who were tasked with being the aides of the god Suhara. They were wearing the clothes of a shrine priestess, but now they were holding weapons. One had a naginata, and the other a bow.

Boichiro laughed.

"You already know the answer to that. I want to control the gods. There is no need for gods with wills of their own."

When the priestesses heard his answer, they both leapt towards either side of him.

"Then we will-"

"-stop you."

"But it's too late."

Boichiro gently tossed Keena up into the air, and then waved his hand quickly from left to right. The priestesses both stopped moving. When Keena came back down he caught her softly, and began to walk forward.

"Wait."

"The Law of Identity exists to take our wills and fulfill the rebirth of the universe," the priestesses said, but all they could do was move their mouths. Their bodies had been sliced in half at the waist, and were lying on the ground.

"Whether you're doing that to evolve into another dimension, or prevent an invasion from another dimension into this one, what

good are you without humanity? The path the gods desire would exterminate humanity from this world."

The priestesses answered,

"No, human data would remain."

"The quantum network that stores the information crosses over the dimensions."

"But where is humanity in that?" Boichiro asked, clearly annoyed. He waved his right hand to silence one of the Liradans.

"The gods take the deceased to a distant land. A fundamental tenet of the religious worldview. Humanity has longed for this for many, many years. We know this."

The other was still talking.

Boichiro shook his head.

"I have no objections to maintaining that story, but that's all the more reason the will of the gods is unneeded."

He stood before the divine tree, and softly put Keena down. Keena was unconscious, but she rested quietly against his knees.

"Come. I'm aware that the gods cannot resist the Law of Identity. Prepare a place for the Contract of One."

When Boichiro spoke, the divine tree began to split down the center. Inside, he could see a space. The best way he could think of to describe what he saw was a vast series of interlocking wooden buildings that seemed to stretch on forever. It was probably some type of spatial generation technology that used mana transfers. It probably wasn't truly infinite, but the wooden corridors, painted in crimson, connected with stairs made from white wood to form what looked like a huge labyrinth. It also looked, he thought, like a complex network.

Keena woke up and looked at the corridor.

"Oh... we're here!" Her voice was strange, a mixture of excitement and despair. Boichiro looked down at her with crossed arms. "Hey, please! Stop it! There's still time!"

Boichiro smiled like he didn't know what to say.

"Listen to me. If we don't do this, humanity will disappear from this world."

"No! That's wrong! Your plan can't escape from the Bonds of Irreproducibility!"

"Wha...?" For the first time, Boichiro was too shocked to speak.

"Come on, imagine it! Let's say you do get rid of the gods' wills, and then time flows to the era you were in. It may go a different

direction, but the result will be the same. Someone will come to defeat you... yes, you, Boichiro. A human will, by humanity's will, become the Demon King, and come to kill you once you've become a god. And nothing else will change," Keena said.

Boichiro felt something cold run down his spine. It was sweat. He knew exactly what Keena's words meant. And as he came to understand, he began to shake as he realized how foolish he'd been.

"You were humanity's last survivor. You carried its hopes, and tried to correct its mistakes. From the position you found yourself in, this wasn't arrogance. You're a true hero. But no matter how many times you try to start over, you'll only meet the same end result." Keena looked back up at Boichiro.

The expression on her face was the same as his former lover, and the last Law of Identity, Rimu Sudo.

"Why... why isn't it me?!" Boichiro screamed.

"Don't cry. You're..."

Keena started to say something, but Boichiro cut her off. He wrapped an arm around Keena's hips and tried to drag her into the divine tree.

"No!"

"If it will all be the same anyway, then at least..."

Boichiro tried to overcome her resistance, but then suddenly stopped. He saw someone else in the shrine.

Keena turned around and looked as well. And her face brightened as she shouted.

"Ackie!"

"Normally I'd say 'I'm supposed to make a cool entrance,' but in a way, I'm like you. So I do understand how you can end up looking pathetic, sometimes. I won't say anything at all." Akuto began to walk forward.

Boichiro let go of Keena. There was a look of complete resignation, and of relief, on his face.

"My whole life I've had to deal with Demon Kings... but I've never met one like you."

"It's sad, isn't it?" Akuto replied. "In the end, we're just cleaning up after a system made by mankind. Maybe that's true of any job, though."

"It's ironic. I've lived for centuries, and only now am I finding someone who understands me."

"Both of us want something similar, after all. But what's the

difference between us, really?"

"I know what it is," Boichiro said, laughing. "Our luck with women."

Akuto looked shocked.

"Yeah, I've got terrible luck with women," he finally said.

"Haha... In that respect, you really are different from me. Now, I finally feel like I can hate you. The winner between the two of us shall get his way." Boichiro stretched out a hand, and pulled his giant sword from the void.

"I guess that's the only way," Akuto said as he tried to step forward, but Boichiro attacked without warning. His sword howled as it flew out to the side.



“Ooh!” Akuto jumped backwards to dodge, but Boichiro struck again and again before he had a chance to recover.

There was a “boom” sound as the air was ripped apart, and part of Akuto’s clothes and body were torn away. Akuto managed to avoid a fatal blow, but his arms and other parts he couldn’t completely defend were damaged.

“You’ve learned to dodge, have you?”

The first time they’d fought, Akuto hadn’t been able to defend himself, but now he was able to use his arms to deflect the blade. Because of that, he’d managed to avoid being blown backwards, but he still couldn’t counterattack.

“But you’re still far too wide open!” Boichiro said as he swung the sword across Akuto’s legs.

“Agh!” Akuto hadn’t expected this and he failed to block. He was forced to his knees.

“Ackie!”

Keena yelled out and tried to run towards him. But the look in Akuto’s eyes told her to stay put.

“Ah...” Keena froze and gulped.

Akuto couldn’t move at all — the joints in his legs were broken. He was regenerating them, but Boichiro showed no sign of giving him time to finish.

“Looks like you learned something from the way the principal fought...” Boichiro said, and then he raised his sword to deliver the killing blow.

“I did, but it looks like I didn’t learn his Hua Jin right,” Akuto said, shaking his head as if he’d given up.

“You’re a funny man, to tell jokes as you’re about to die. But I’ll let those be your last words!” Boichiro brought the sword down.

The blade pierced right through Akuto’s head.

Even with Akuto’s regenerative abilities, and even with his tough body, there was no way to survive an attack like that.

The sword split him clean in two.

...Or at least, it should have.

“!”

Boichiro was astonished to find that the sensation wasn’t what he’d expected.

The sword was stuck into the floor of the temple. But the sword

was also pierced through Akuto's body.

"Tch...!" Boichiro immediately threw the sword aside and jumped backwards.

Akuto was right in front of him. But the sword had done no damage to him, as if he was a hologram.

"Impossible...!" Boichiro yelled.

Then, he realized that the real Akuto was right behind him.

"Haah!"

Just as he turned around, Akuto landed a hard punch directly into his stomach. The blast wave traveled all the way through his body as he bent forward.

"Th-This can't be..." Boichiro moaned, barely able to breathe.

"This little magic trick, however, I was able to master." Akuto said. The false Akuto on the floor blurred and vanished. "You create a mana screen and then project an image onto it. It's just a magic trick, and there's literally nothing more to it. You can only use it once in a hand-to-hand battle. If the battle's at range, you can use it until the enemy figures it out. That's what the principal said."

"I-I fell for such a stupid trick...?"

"I don't like falling for stupid tricks, either. I know how you feel," Akuto said, but he immediately landed another punch on Boichiro.

This time, Boichiro's body twisted as he didn't say a thing. Akuto kept punching. There was no rage or hatred on his face. He was only punching to make the enemy stop moving. If anything, there was a kind of sadness.

Eventually Boichiro passed out, unconscious. Akuto shook his head, as if to say that something was wrong. And then he heard a calm voice echo throughout the room.

"Demon King, now is the hour to make the Contract of One with the Law of Identity." One of the fallen priestesses was looking at him.

Akuto silently walked over to Keena.

"Ackie..." Keena stared at him. He took her hand.

"This has gotten really crazy, huh?"

"Yeah. But it's only going to get worse..."

They looked at each other, and perhaps they understood each other without needing to say a word, because they both nodded at the same time and turned to the priestess.

"We won't make the contract."

“We can do it whenever we want to.”

The priestess responded in a voice full of emotion, uncharacteristic for a Liradan.

“I...Impossible! But then why...”

“We’re going to kill a god so that everyone understands! We’ll destroy this place, and shut down the god’s ability to act as a network terminal!” Akuto said as he reached out a hand to the sky.

“Th-That’s meaningless... Even if the terminal dies, the god’s true body is the will within the network. Only the functions of the god Suhara, and a portion of the stored data, will be lost. All it will do is cause chaos...”

“I know that.” Akuto cut off her explanation. “But even so, doing it will wake some people up.”

Mana began to gather around him as he spoke. He was going to cause a pure mana explosion, just like he’d done when he’d first awakened, and hadn’t been able to control his mana.

“You might disappear as well. Is that what you want? What is the point of this? Nothing will change if you do...” the priestess said.

“No, things will change. If nothing else, the story of the Demon King’s rebellion will end. Only then will humanity be able to stand face-to-face with the gods, who are creatures with will, but not a self.”

“We understand your will. Before we allow you to do this, we will have both you and the Law of Identity disappear. And then we shall apply what we’ve learned from you to the next Demon King...” the priestess said, and the whole temple began to rumble. It wasn’t because of the mana waves Akuto had created. “I have activated the defense system. The divine tree that functions as the terminal shall be moved as a unit.”

The center of the divine tree closed itself once more. And then, the whole huge tree began to shine with a mana light as it floated off the ground.

The temple began to collapse. The roof fell in around the tree, and then the floor began to collapse from underneath Akuto and Keena’s feet.

“Kyah!” Keena screamed as she clung to Akuto.

The space below the floor wasn’t that big, but if they were caught in the collapse, it was clear they’d be crushed by the falling rubble.

“Ackie...!” As Akuto was about to leap upwards, Keena pointed behind him. Boichiro was lying on the floor.

“...Fine.”

Akuto grabbed his hand. Perhaps that woke him up, because Boichiro looked upwards. He seemed surprised, but Akuto just nodded.

“Let’s go.”

And then Akuto jumped. He leapt off the crumbling rubble, and landed on the roof.

“Humanity still needs the gods. And the gods still need mankind. You cannot be allowed to interfere with the moment when those two intersect...”

He could hear the eerie voice of the priestess below. Akuto looked down just in time to see the doll-like head on her severed body fall beneath the crumbling floor.

“Tch...” Akuto looked away, and then up at the sky. The floating tree was already a good distance away.

“Peterhausen!” Akuto called out. His dragon swept down from above in answer.

“This is my last job, isn’t it?” he shouted.

“Yes. This is the last job I’ll ask you to do as a friend.”

Akuto left Keena and Boichiro behind as he got on Peterhausen’s back.

“Wait. Are you really willing to risk your life to do this?” Boichiro pointed to the tree, but Akuto wasn’t looking at him.

“I am. I was born with a ridiculous goal. If I can choose my last actions in life with my own will, that’s enough for me,” he said, still not looking back.

“But you may still not change anything. Maybe it will be as I was told, that nothing will change and humanity is doomed. What makes you so certain that what you’re doing is right?” Boichiro asked.

Akuto ordered Peterhausen to take off.

“I realized that you’re stronger if you can sympathize with the people in your daily life, as opposed to belief or stories that are far removed from you. If the system is destroyed, humanity will be able to truly look at one another.” And then he turned back to Keena. “Just like Keena said, if we all ate rice together, the world might be at peace.”

And then he had Peterhausen fly up into the air, but...

“Rice!” Keena suddenly yelled out happily.

“Huh?”

Akuto was unsure of what to make of this sudden change in Keena, but Peterhausen was already high in the sky. The slow-moving tree was already right in front of them. But surprisingly, Keena flew up in the sky and chased after him.

“Ackie, no! Don’t go ‘bon!’”

“Wh-What? Don’t tell me she has a different mind than when she’s the Law of Identity?” Akuto said, but Keena wasn’t listening at all.

“Ackie, tell me exactly what you’re going to do now!” she said sternly.

“Um, well... I’m going to ram into that tree and transfer its functions over to Peterhausen. And then I’m going to destroy it.” Akuto said. Keena shook her head.

“Don’t do that. If you do, you’ll die, right?”

Akuto didn’t know what to say.

“No, we don’t know that for sure. But it’s definitely dangerous, and once I kill a god, I’ll lose the place I call home. So...”

“No! You dummy! Dummy! I won’t let you!” Keena shook her head violently.



But then they heard what sounded like a scream from Peterhausen.

“Master, it’s too late! I’m ramming the tree!”

“Fine... Keena, out of the way!”

Akuto pushed her away. She was now a distance away from Peterhausen, but she still didn’t seem to give up. As she flew, she began to strip off her clothes, and then disappear.

Now even Akuto didn’t know where she was.

“...Let’s go!” But Akuto couldn’t back out now.

Peterhausen fired a metal stake from his mouth into the tree, opening a huge hole in it. And then he went inside the hole.

“The space inside this is a pseudospace, but we still have our physical bodies. We might be attacked.” Peterhausen warned.

Inside was the labyrinth that Boichiro had seen when he opened the tree. Everywhere Akuto looked, he saw corridors made from crimson pillars and white trees.

“Take over its functions,” Akuto said. Peterhausen stretched out cables from his torso in all directions. One after another, they attached themselves to the connector ports in the corridors.

“When the takeover is complete, people like Yuko Hattori will be freed from their god. But it will take a little time. Until I’m done...” Peterhausen suddenly stopped.

Akuto looked around and saw why.

Liradans in shrine priestess clothing were peeking out everywhere from within the infinite corridors. All of them were looking at Akuto and Peterhausen with doll-like eyes.

“Those are physical beings... aren’t they.” Akuto said softly. Peterhausen nodded.

“The corridors seem infinite, but they’re not. Of course, there’s not an infinite number of Liradans, either.”

But they were still at a horrible disadvantage. Peterhausen couldn’t move, and Akuto had to protect him. If even a single cable was cut, the takeover would fail, and Yuko and the other Suhara worshipers would be in lethal danger.

Of course, right now the gods and the Demon King weren’t on the same side. Akuto and Peterhausen were simply foreign invaders that the gods would be happy to kill.

“Damn it... After all this, am I going to die without being able

to do anything?!" Akuto yelled. But Peterhausen just laughed.

"It's not over yet. Just because I can't move doesn't mean I can't fight. Let's give 'em hell. You said you'd have no place to belong to, but we can just keep fighting until all the gods' terminals are destroyed!"

"Hmm... I suppose that's fine." Akuto whispered. As if that was the sign they were waiting for, countless shrine priestesses attacked Peterhausen — all at once.

They clung to his body like violent ants trying to swarm their prey. Akuto tried to rip them off, but more and more kept coming, and it was all he could do to deal with them. There was no mercy in their attacks. Whether he liked it or not, it was clear to Akuto that these Liradans were a different type of being, one that couldn't communicate with humans on a fundamental level.

"I can't believe something that would fight like this would want to lead humanity!" Akuto said angrily. The mana expanded and began to swirl around him.

But—

"Gaaaaah!" Peterhausen screamed.

"What's wrong?" Akuto turned to him.

The part of Peterhausen's body that had been injured in the collision with the carrier was glowing.

"No..."

Akuto realized the reason Peterhausen was in pain. The takeover of Suhara's functions, the battle, and Akuto's mana control — all three of these simultaneously had overloaded Peterhausen's abilities.

"The processing is almost complete! Just keep going!" Peterhausen's voice was filled with pain, but still raging and strong.

"But...!"

"We both came here prepared to die! We were prepared to sacrifice ourselves to save others. Only a fool would take the safe option now! My master, I'm going to remove your mana limiter. Then you can use your power without worrying about me! In exchange..."

"You can't guarantee I'll survive, huh? Sounds nice and fair!"

Akuto began to concentrate mana within his body once more. When his body reached the stage where it began to glow, the bodies of the priestesses around him began to get blasted away.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Akuto was aware that the mana he was concentrating was now out of his control. No matter how he tried to stop it, the torrent of power and emotions was outside his control.

He used the power to blast the priestesses away from Peterhausen. Now free, Peterhausen let loose a roar of glee.

"I've taken control of Suhara's functions! I'm going to start releasing humanity from its control! Now we can blow them away without worrying about a thing!"

But Akuto didn't answer. His body was giving off a terrible heat. He'd fallen to his knees, and the floor beneath him was melting as he sank into it. The sheer amount of energy he'd produced was melting the pseudospace itself.

"Wait... master! Master! Tch... I can't get his power back under control!" The uncertainty in Peterhausen's voice, which was rare enough for him to begin with, quickly turned to fear. "They're starting to close the pseudospace to keep us from absorbing it!"

The corridors were beginning to flatten into one another, as if they were being folded up. The priestesses were caught up within them without mercy, being crushed along with the pseudospace. There was nothing left of them, only the void.

The collapsing space was approaching Akuto at terrible speed.

"You need to release your power! Let it explode! If you do that you can annihilate the whole divine tree's pseudospace!" Peterhausen yelled, but Akuto still couldn't move a finger.

The dragon shook his head.

"...Is it going to be difficult, then?"

"Hey, why is it difficult?"

"Mana is controlled by emotions. My master fears releasing his power." Only after Peterhausen spoke did he realize he didn't know who he was talking to. But then he got his answer.

"But he kept saying he was going to do it, though!"

Peterhausen realized that Keena was nearby him, invisible.

"His will to change the world is strong. But it bothers him that he can't take responsibility for what comes next. He has none of the abilities required to create a new world... But that doesn't matter. You need to run. You'll be caught up in this if you don't."

"But then why don't you run, Petey?"

"I have a duty to try and control my master's mana to the very end, and help the explosion occur. That is what will save his life."

"Then are you going to die, Petey?" Keena said, surprised.

“That’s correct, yes. Another dragon with my capabilities may be created in the future, but it won’t have the same history or the same self as me. Only I have that.”

“But I don’t want that! That isn’t how I want this to end! That’s just how boys like things to end!” Keena shouted.

Peterhausen laughed gently.

“Then tell my master that he’s wrong. And tell him what he can create when the story of the gods is over.”

“Petey...” Keena turned visible and patted Peterhausen on the head.

“Take this. I’m sorry it’s not much.” Peterhausen removed a single fang, and lowered it into Keena’s hand.

Keena looked at it and nodded, and then held it tightly as she ran towards Akuto. Akuto was giving off an incredible light, but Keena entered the light and heat without trouble.

As he suffered, she held him gently in her naked arms. And then she whispered to him.

“It’s okay. I’m going to do my best with a lot of things, for your sake, and so that everyone can be friends.”

Akuto opened his eyes.

And then a god died.

○

“Why did all of this happen?” Keena asked. She didn’t seem to be asking anyone in particular, but she was answered.

“That’s a difficult question. Truly difficult.”

Keena’s eyes were closed. She was passed out, so she wasn’t speaking aloud. She was practically dreaming, so how could she get an answer?

“Who are you?”

“I am myself. Another person within you,” the Law of Identity said.

“A me, within me?”

“That’s right. I am the eternal me, who lives on forever, even after you die. I am the proof that I am myself. It’s hard to understand, but that’s how it works. That’s why somebody wanted to kill you. They wanted me, so they wanted to kill you, hoping I would enter the body of someone they could use for their purposes.”

“I see. It’s rough for us both, huh?”

“Yes. It really is.”

They both laughed.

“So, what can you do?”

“A lot of things. But maybe nothing at all.”

“Which is it?”

“Who can say? I don’t know. But I know a little about what you want to do.”

“Yeah. Then can you do that?”

“Yeah. I think I can. You want to grant the wishes of the two boys who fell in love with us, right?”

“Yup!” Keena nodded cheerfully.

“Let’s bring rest to the time traveler’s soul, in the true sense.”

“What does that mean?”

“His true wish is that the person I once was is happy in the future. Let’s guarantee that for him. That’s why he tried to take control of the gods.”

“Then what will happen to Boichiro himself?”

“That’s up to him to decide. Perhaps he’ll settle in some different time... or perhaps he’ll cause something else to happen in a future era.”

“That’s not what I meant. How will Boichiro know that somebody in the future is happy?”

“He’ll just have to believe us. Yes, Boichiro will just have to believe in the child who was chosen to be the Demon King.”

“You mean Ackie?”

“He did what he did because he was trying to change the future, and struggle against a fate that’s already been decided. We’ll just have to ask him to believe. That’s why it’s actually Akuto who’s going to truly guarantee the peace of his soul.”

“But Ackie...”

“Yes. At this rate, he’ll remain an enemy of humanity. That’s something that he doesn’t want, either. So I’m going to change everyone’s memories, just a little. Really, just a little.”

“Change everyone’s memories?”

“Yes. I’m going to make them think it was another Demon King, not him, who did all this. If I change that, and nothing else, he can go back to the life he had.”

“Will that make Ackie happy?”

“I don’t know. He’ll go back to his old life, but that means he’ll

have to keep fighting. And he's got an even more painful destiny waiting for him!"

"Knowing Ackie, he'll be fine," Keena said confidently.

"I'm glad to hear that. I've watched over the world for so long, but even I was hesitant to give life to the gods. Hey, don't you think the flow of human history is such a wonderful and beautiful thing?"

And then the conversation between Keena and the Law of Identity ended.

○

Fortunately, the airship's equipment was undamaged. Junko borrowed it and used it to follow Akuto. But it took long enough to find him that she ended up losing a lot of time.

And while she flew, she was astonished to see the divine tree that everyone recognized floating in the air. Of course, this in and of itself was shocking enough.

But what she saw next was even more shocking: the divine tree exploded from within.

The blast was big enough that you could probably see it for dozens of kilometers around. The tree turned into a huge pillar of fire, stretching all the way down to the ground.

Junko couldn't speak.

There was no better way to make it clear that the god was dead. A black dragon made of smoke spread its wings around the pillar of fire, as if laughing at everything around it. Junko knew Peterhausen, so she knew that it was his silhouette, but if someone didn't, there would be no more nightmarish scene imaginable.

The shockwave from the blast traveled through the whole empire's territory in an instant, and the noise reached all the way into the clouds.

"Oh no!"

Junko dodged past the shockwave and headed for the ground, but as she got near it she could hear the sound of the trees in the forest creaking in the wind. As soon as she landed, she jammed the Sohaya no Tsurugi into the earth to support herself. If she hadn't, she would have been blown away.

But the wind from the blast subsided in a few seconds. Junko looked up to see what had happened.

And then, she saw something strange. Something was rising up

towards the heavens from the center of the blast. It was a pillar of tiny particles of light. The light turned into a thin cloud, and seemed to spread out to cover the whole world.

"...What really happened up there?" Junko found herself whispering. She ran towards the center of the blast crater, where she saw Akuto and Keena.

"Are you two okay...?" she said as she ran up to them.

Akuto was lying on top of Keena's body, as if to protect her.

"Wake up. Are you okay? There's so much I want to ask you. What did you do? And who was that... Boichiro... guy..."

Junko suddenly fell silent.

"Oh, it's Junko!" Keena said innocently as she squirmed out from under Akuto's body. She smiled and waved hello.

"Huh...?" Akuto sat up too. He looked at Junko.

"Y-You dummy...!" Junko's face turned red as she began to flail her hands about.

It was only then Akuto realized that Keena was totally naked.

"Uwah... Wait..."

"Nooo!" Keena grabbed onto Akuto to hide herself.

"You dummy! What are you doing?! That's indecent!" Junko took off her jacket and threw it at Akuto and Keena. And then she looked away. "What are you doing? Do you know what just happened? A god... the divine tree that housed the god just exploded!"

"Well, you know that was what I was trying to make happen." Akuto sighed. Junko turned around in surprise.

"Th-Then this..."

"That's right. The god Suhara is gone now. All that's happened is that the data disappeared, but now everybody will be forced to think about the fact that the gods are just systems. If that makes the world change..." Akuto suddenly trailed off. Then he continued, "...But I guess this means you and I are enemies. I know what I said, and I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise."

Junko's face went red.

"W-Well, you know... Maybe you don't need to um... worry about it? I-I mean, I was feeling a little weird myself when I said that stuff..."

"It's not that easy. I'm a traitor now. And you need to support the Hattori clan. Forget about me, and..."

Before Akuto could continue, Junko grabbed his hand. She was

still looking at her feet, but her grip was firm.

"D-Don't say that. I actually told everyone in the clan I was giving it up for you. So... so..."

She raised her head and looked Akuto in the eyes. Even Akuto was smart enough to figure out what this meant, and he gulped.

But...

"You mean you agree with my beliefs, right? I'm going to treasure that. Yes, I'll try to take your opinion into account as much as I can, and make sure you don't lose your social position..."

Before he could finish, the flat side of the Sohaya no Tsurugi slammed into his stomach.

"I guess it didn't work out after all, huh sis?" called a voice from behind her. Yuko and Hiroshi were walking towards her. Yuko looked happy, and Hiroshi looked embarrassed.

"Wh-What are you talking about, Yuko? It's not like... Wait, are you alright?"

Junko's expression suddenly changed. Yuko held up both hands for her to see.

"I'm doing just fine. Better than before, if anything." Yuko walked up to Akuto and poked him in the ribs with her elbow. "I don't care about the clan either, so do something about my sister, would you mister?"

She had a mischievous grin on her face, but both Akuto and Junko were surprised.

"H-Hey, is it okay for you to touch him?" Junko said, her eyes wide with surprise. Yuko seemed confused.

"What do you mean? He came to our house. And then he turned down your marriage offer, and you got mad at him."

"M-Mad... Well, maybe, but he's the Demon King..."

Even if the demon beast mana was gone from her body, that didn't mean the psychological trauma had healed. She might not hate Akuto anymore, but it still didn't seem like she should be willing to touch him so soon.

But Yuko's next words were even more shocking.

"Demon King? Oh, yeah, he probably died in that explosion. Akuto fought him, right? Because he's on the disciplinary committee. He helped beat the Demon King. He was so cool, right? If you don't want him, maybe I'll take him," Yuko said, speaking loudly so that both Junko and Hiroshi could hear, and then she spun around and laughed. But both Junko and Hiroshi were too

stunned to say anything.

"Wait, do you mean..." Akuto gasped and looked at Keena. But Keena, now wearing Junko's jacket, just looked up at him and grinned.

○

"Akuto! Oh, you're alive! And now we've taken our first step towards world conquest!"

Fujiko's reaction was no different than before. Akuto had quietly gone back inside the Academy, and he was standing in front of the now-empty altar in the basement as Fujiko draped herself over his body.

"F-Fujiko... Get off me, please. I don't know about world conquest, but something weird is going on," Akuto protested.

"Something weird?"

Akuto told her that everyone's memories had been changed. As a scientist, even she couldn't help but be interested. She was still clinging to Akuto's arm, but she began to look for information on a mana screen.

"...This is fascinating. Everyone's saying the battle was caused by another Demon King, who died during the fight. None of these comments show anyone thinking that you're the Demon King..."

"Then I'm..." Akuto's expression suddenly brightened. Fujiko pouted unhappily.

"I would prefer you not feel happy about this! We were so close, so close to the world being changed, and the Demon King at the center of it has vanished from everyone's memories!"

"The world's going to change, whether or not I'm at its center."

Akuto was smiling with joy. He was free. And people's opinions were starting to change, just as he'd hoped they would. They were realizing that the gods were a system, and that worshiping them as a religion opened them up to abuse by the powerful.

"No! Now is the time to rise up! You haven't lost your power, right? Don't worry, I'll make a man out of you! And I know just what I need to make you rise up..."

She suddenly knocked him over.

"Uwah! Fujiko, I don't think..."

"No, don't hold back. No matter what people say, we have a responsibility towards the world that comes after the revolution!

And I think part of that responsibility means giving you an heir...”

“Th-That’s crazy...!”

“Hahahaha! Come on, you know you want it! Come on! Come on!”

Fujiko began to rub Akuto’s body, but she was quickly interrupted.

“Hey.”

Suddenly she was whacked from behind with a fist. There was no sign of anybody around them, and there was only one person who could hit someone from a distance like that.

“This is still part of the school grounds. No public displays of affection,” Lily said as she entered the room, a moment after her stretched-out arm had done so.

“President...” Akuto looked up at her.

Lily had a sarcastic smile on her face.

“Looks like you got the best of me again. But what kind of magic trick did you use to change people’s memories?”

“I don’t know, myself. There must be some... some great power moving that I don’t know about.”

“Hmph. Well, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change my job. For a while, I’m going to be busy rebuilding the school...” She turned to leave, but then she looked at the altar. “Hey, I don’t see that pot.”

Fujiko suddenly got a look of panic on her face. She winced a little as she told them what had happened.

“Th-That... That got taken by that rubber monster.”

“Is that true?” Lily looked panicked, herself.

Akuto didn’t seem to understand.

“A pot? What was in it?”

“It was an attempt to cultivate your cells. I hope they don’t use it for anything bad... but I suppose that’s too much to hope for.” Lily sighed.

5 - A Transfer Student From Overseas

—Now, it's time to begin a new life.

Akuto woke up. He'd checked yesterday, and found that most of the students — that is, everyone but Junko, Hiroshi, Keena, and the others — had forgotten he was the Demon King. He was free from his old life.

—My goal in life has changed, but I still want to study and change society from within. Anyway, it's so nice not to have anything weird happen this morning...

"Good morning."

He heard a voice from the shelf above. Korone was lying there, in her usual position.

"Morning. Wait, what's going on with your mission to watch me?"

"Well, the order itself doesn't exist. I'm afraid that I'm about to become a stray Liradan. I could ask my god, but if I did that, unfortunately, I might be truly separated from you this time," Korone said flatly.

—I see. So not everything has worked out, then.

"...Tell me when you're going to do that. I don't want have to say goodbye suddenly."

"Of course. I intend to stay here for a while. I'm the only Liradan aware of the large scale memory-alteration that's taken place, and I want to investigate that."

"Okay, thanks."

Akuto looked out the window.

"Uwah!" He couldn't help but gasp. The school building was half-destroyed, and there were holes everywhere in the yard. And the remains of the carrier were still lying there, too.

"...Well, at least I know that battle wasn't a dream."

He called up a mana screen and looked through the news. Of course, there were tons of stories about what had happened.

"Demon King fights fierce battle at Constant Magical Academy, destroys divine tree of Suhara..."

There were stories about the damage to the school, the errors in the system that had resulted from the god's death, and the serious effects they'd had, but more than anything...

"The Demon King perished in the battle..."

—So I guess that's what everybody thinks, huh? It looks like it's over, then.

With a little bit of sorrow, and a lot of relief, Akuto finished changing into his uniform. He went outside, and Keena ran up to him right away.

"Ackie! Good morning!"

"Good morning." Akuto nodded and looked back at her. Keena was acting the same as ever.

—There's no… way...

He'd been wondering if maybe she was behind this. No, not wondering. He was almost sure.

"Hey, about yesterday..."

"Yeah, it was really rough, huh?" Keena laughed innocently.

"No... I mean it was, but... did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Alter everyone's memories..."

"It wasn't me. It was me, though."

Keena was speaking words that made no sense. Akuto blinked several times in confusion.

"Huh? What...?"

"Who cares? It all worked out. I haven't seen Boichiro since then either, but I'm sure he's fine."

Keena laughed, and when he saw her laughing, Akuto felt his worries slip away.

"You're right. It worked out, and that's what matters. Well, I guess it's not worth overthinking..."

And then he heard a voice.

"Hey, what are you standing there for? After what happened yesterday, all the dorm students are getting a physical."

It was Junko.

"Oh, Junko, about yesterday..."

"You dummy! Forget about yesterday! And why are you calling me by first name now? After all that's happened..." She started to mumble to herself as she walked, keeping her distance from Akuto.

"I'm sorry, Hattori." Akuto apologized as he followed her to the nurse's office.

“No, um... If you want to call me by my first name, that’s okay. Yeah,” she said, without turning around.

“Th-Thank you,” Akuto said earnestly.

“D-Dummy. Anyway, if you’re not the Demon King, then I can be more honest with myself around you. S-So from now on...” She trailed off.

“From now on?”

“D-Don’t make me say it!” she shouted.

Before long, they arrived at the nurse’s office.

—That’s right. If I’m not the Demon King, there’s a lot of things I can do now. I don’t know about marriage, but I can learn from Hattori’s family...

As Akuto thought to himself, his turn for the physical came around. All he had to do was sit in a chair and listen to the voice of an artificial spirit, so he kept thinking to himself as it went on.

—I won’t be using My Demon King powers in class, either. It’s sad, but Peterhausen is gone now, too...

“...Demon King.”

—That’s right. The Demon King. If my Demon King powers are gone, I can start studying again...

“...Demon King.”

—That’s right. I’m thinking about the Demon King... Huh?

Akuto looked up as he realized the people around him were murmuring something. All of them were looking at his face.

“He’s been prophesied to be the Demon King. There’s no doubt about it. We missed it during his entrance physical, but this time, that’s what it says.”

Yatagarasu, the artificial spirit in the nurse’s office, raised its voice and spoke loudly.

“D-Demon King...!”

“Was a new one reborn just after yesterday?’

“No, he must’ve been the Demon King from the start...”

“That’s right. We were friends until yesterday, but come to think of it, he always had a cruel streak about him...!”

—W-Wait!

Akuto jumped up out of his chair, knocking it back with a loud noise. The only one who was looking at him the same as usual was Keena. Even Junko, who knew what was going on, looked ready to attack him.



“H-How many times are you going to betray me!” she screamed. “If you weren’t the Demon King, I was going to tell you that you could make me your lover!”

She was so riled up that she was screaming her true thoughts again. Of course, the people around her began to murmur more.

“Unbelievable! He even toyed with that stuffy student class president!”

“Just what you’d expect from a Demon King! He’s terrible!

—Wait, guys, it’s not like that!

“N-No... Wait, everyone!” Akuto yelled.

“We know now that the words ‘Demon King’ refer to somebody who’s going to destroy the system. You could say it’s another name for someone who kills gods, too. Now that we know that, it’s meaningless to say that any individual is the Demon King. Don’t you agree?”

Akuto’s voice was clear and steady. But because his words were so clear, everyone was forced to listen, and because they were so steady, everyone understood exactly what he’d been trying to say. One of his classmates spoke up.

“Does that mean that you’ve got a problem with the decisions the gods make?”

“Wait... No... That’s not it. The gods are only a system, and that system can be abused. But I still think that we need to keep that system going, for the future’s sake. I do think we need to support gradually reducing the number of people who can operate that system, and make it more flexible, though,” Akuto hurriedly added. But...

“That’s what the black mages say, isn’t it?”

“It’s meaningless for the Demon King to be an individual... So that’s it. Now that the Demon King’s dead, they’re going to resort to being a terrorist group.”

That was when Akuto really started to panic.

“No! You don’t know what the Demon King is, that’s why you’re just making things up. The Demon King is a human being, made by the gods through mana alteration in order to commit suicide. That’s why they’re forced to rise up against the gods, but at their core they aren’t evil, and they don’t really want to destroy the system!”

“He’s starting to contradict himself...”

“Doesn’t he know a little too much about the Demon King?”

—Crap. That stuff wasn’t public knowledge…

“Wait! What I’m trying to say here is that the last Demon King proved the gods are an illusion. Which means that the Demon King is an illusion as well. Look at reality! The gods are a system, and I, the person telling you this, am real, and right here!”

Akuto puffed out his chest.

There was a moment of silence. But it wasn’t because everyone was so impressed with Akuto’s words.

—H-Huh?

He looked around. His classmates were all completely terrified of him now.

“So that’s it… He’s saying that the Demon King isn’t dead…?”

“The Demon King we saw yesterday was an illusion… in other words, he isn’t really dead!”

—D-Didn’t this happen to me before?

Akuto began to sweat.

And then…

“Akuto! You always talk too much!”

Junko drew the Sohaya no Tsurugi. It was no longer under Suhara’s influence, but it was still an item of incredible power. The blade shone with a rainbow light as she slashed at Akuto with the blunt side of the blade.

“Uwah!” Akuto blocked it with an arm, then concentrated the mana in his arm. It was something he could’ve easily done yesterday. But…

“Aah!”

“Huh… W-Wah?!”

He couldn’t control the mana, and so it leaked out of his arm and exploded.

○

—N-No… Something’s not right.

The way the other students were looking at him hurt. He’d done serious damage to the nurse’s office, and now the whole school knew about him. He’d managed to make it to class, but even the teacher in charge of the nurse’s office, Miss Mitsuko, had been looking at him coldly.

“I’m sure you’re all confused to have a Demon King in our

class," she said in a heavy voice. "But since he hasn't actually done anything bad yet, it's been decided that he can stay..."

"I am a Liradan, sent to observe him," Korone said, as she stood next to the lectern wearing her uniform. "Please call me Korone. You may feel I've been here before. If so, you're mistaken."

By now Akuto didn't have the energy left to say anything at all. He just let his head drop to the desk.

But Mitsuko continued.

"Um... I know you're all surprised to have a new friend, but I'm actually going to introduce you to another transfer student. She's been specially invited from overseas. Please be good to her... Okay, Keina, come in."

—All this chaos, and now a transfer student? I hope she's not too scared of me... Huh? Keena?

Akuto looked up. A girl with pretty blond hair and an innocent smile came into the room.

Akuto couldn't take his eyes off her. It wasn't because of her face; she was wearing a hairpiece with a bird design in her hair.

—Oh, that's the one I gave to Keena when I left the orphanage...

He stood up in shock, and she turned to look at him.

"It's you!" And the she ran from the lectern all the way to his seat in the back row, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Do you remember the pu-ramise we made at the or-fan-ege? It's me! Keina! I missed you so much!"

Her Japanese was unsteady and halting.

—Huh? Two Keenas?

Akuto turned towards the red-haired Keena. She was looking at him and Keina in surprise.

"Oh, I'm never letting you go again, my daa-rling!" Keina said.

Afterword

Thank you once again for buying this book. It's me, Shoutaro Mizuki. My hobby is fishing, and lately I've been fishing up all kinds of weird stuff. Anahase fish, half-lined cardinals, stuff like that. I injure them and then toss them back into the sea, again and again. I'm sure I'll never get to go to Ryugu Palace at this rate. No, it's better not to go there anyway, right?

This is volume 5, the second part of a two-part book. If you don't have volume 4, it would make me happy if you bought it. Keep in mind if you read this volume before volume 4, you're going to be spoiled. If you just picked it up because you liked the cover, please find volume 4 immediately. It may be right next to you!

For once, I'm actually going to talk about the book.

I imagine a lot of you had no idea what Boichiro was talking about in his long monologue, but all I expected you to take from that is, "A guy who says this weird crap is not going to be a hit with the ladies." No asking if the man who wrote the dialogue himself does any better.

Anyway, we reached a conclusion this volume. But, and while I'll avoid spoiling the details for people who haven't read it yet... yes, it continues. There's lots more to come, lots that hasn't been resolved, and lots more that I have planned. And so next time I'm going to be upping the amount of comedy. It's time for this to really be a book set in a school. Of course, it'll take up where this volume ended.

Now on to other media developments

The CD drama came out on 2/25/2009, from Beatniks Inc. It's a very talented cast, with Akuto being played by Daisuke Ono, Keena by Mai Nakahara, Junko by Ryoko Shiraishi, Korone by Minori Chihara, and Fujiko by Yuki Makishima. It's a slightly different version of the volume 1 story, along with a song by Mai Nakahara.

That's a great deal on its own, but it also got a special illustration by Souichi Itou on the inside of the CD jacket. It's something only people who buy it get to see. And it's amazing. It's

honestly something I want to enlarge and print out on my sheets. I'll come out and say it. It's sexy. But it's also wonderfully silly, like, "Why is this illustration on the backside of the jacket?" It's a must-see.

Of course, Mr. Itou's comic is still running in Champion RED, too. Check it out as well.

Anyway, on to another topic. I was having lunch with my editor and the people next to us were talking about H-Games in a loud voice.

"Why are you talking about h-games when I'm trying to eat?! And especially about a game that was released unfinished!" I thought to myself angrily, and I was about to say something when I realized... We were eating in Akihabara. Of course, I didn't say a word. Lately it's become a town where maids can walk right by you and nobody notices.

Lastly, thank-yous.

Souichi Itou, the illustrator. I went to Comiket, but you'd already gone home so I didn't get to see you. Next time I'd like to get a chance to see you... And also, I saw a cosplayer of Keena at Comiket in Kyarano! That's right. I didn't get to see the official cosplayer at our company booth though.

My editor, Ohashi. The early deadline this time paid off, and I was able to get it in just a little later than usual! No, actually I think it took the same time to write as always. I look forward to working with you in the next volume.

And thank you to everyone involved with the drama CD. I really appreciate you all.

Now it's on to volume 6! Like I said above, it's time for high school hijinks. There's lots more fun to be had!



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Demon King Daimaou: Volume 5
by Shoutarou Mizuki

Translated by Adam Lensenmayer
Edited by Aimee Zink

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Original Japanese edition published in 2009 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2018